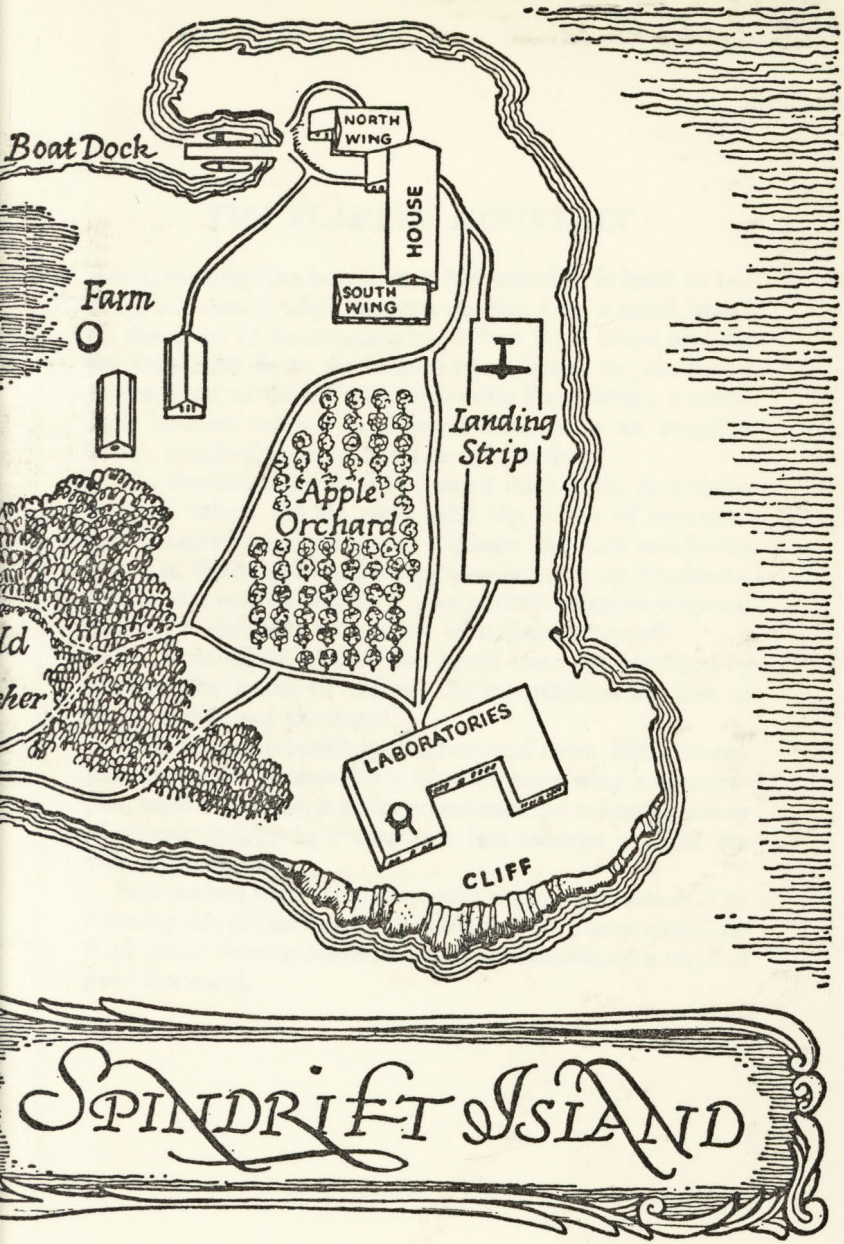
A RICK BRANT SCIENCE ADVENTURE

THE FLAMING MOUNTAIN

By JOHN BLAINE

Cultivated Land
Wooded Land
Tidal Flats
CLIFF
CLEARING
New Jersey Coast



SPINDRIFT ISLAND

THE FLAMING MOUNTAIN

Rock, melting like butter on a hot stove! It is hard to believe, but that is what happens on San Luz, a small island off the coast of South America. When Rick Brant and his pal Dan Scott fly to the famous resort island to join Rick's father, head of the Spindrift Scientific Foundation, a seemingly inactive volcano is about to explode in an eruption which could easily blow San Luz off the map.

The immediate threat is to a small town at the foot of the volcano, where the air reeks with the fumes of hydrogen sulfide and sulfur dioxide, and it is here that Rick and Scotty help Dr. Brant and his scientist associates set up headquarters, in the hope of finding a way of controlling an eruption that is growing into a certainty with fantastic speed.

But their efforts to save the island town are hindered by the superior forces of nature, the superstitious fatalism of the people — and sabotage!

With the earth opening up all around them, Rick, Scotty, and the scientists have little hope of preventing a catastrophe, until a decision is made to unleash the awesome power of atomic energy in a desperate last attempt to fight the volcanic eruption.

Jam-packed with excitement and swift, tense action, *The Flaming Mountain* has all the elements that have made the Rick Brant Science Adventure series a favorite with boys all over the world.

The Rick Brant Science-Adventure *Stories*

BY JOHN BLAINE

The Rocket's Shadow
The Lost City
Sea Gold
100 Fathoms Under
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The Phantom Shark
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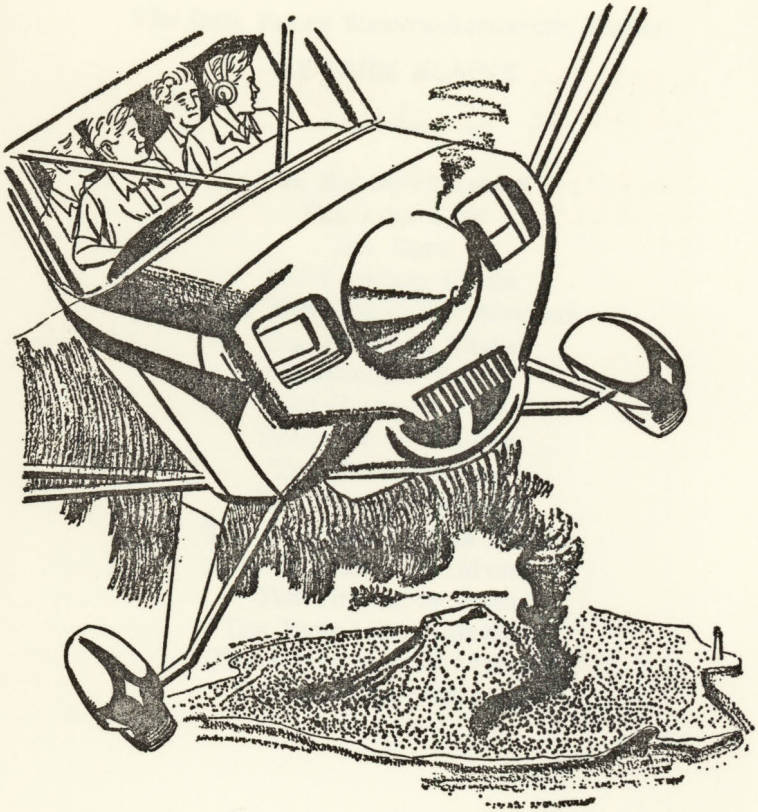
The Wailing Octopus
The Electronic Mind Reader
The Scarlet Lake Mystery
The Pirates of Shan
The Blue Ghost Mystery
The Egyptian Cat Mystery
The Flaming Mountain



Rick swung the Sky Wagon onto a northward course that would take them past the volcano

A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE STORY

THE FLAMING MOUNTAIN

BY JOHN BLAINE

GROSSET & DUNLAP PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK, N. Y.

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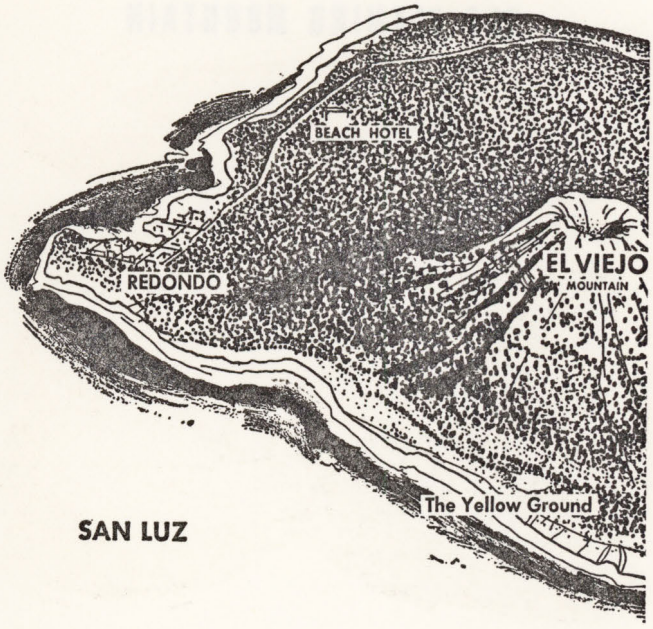
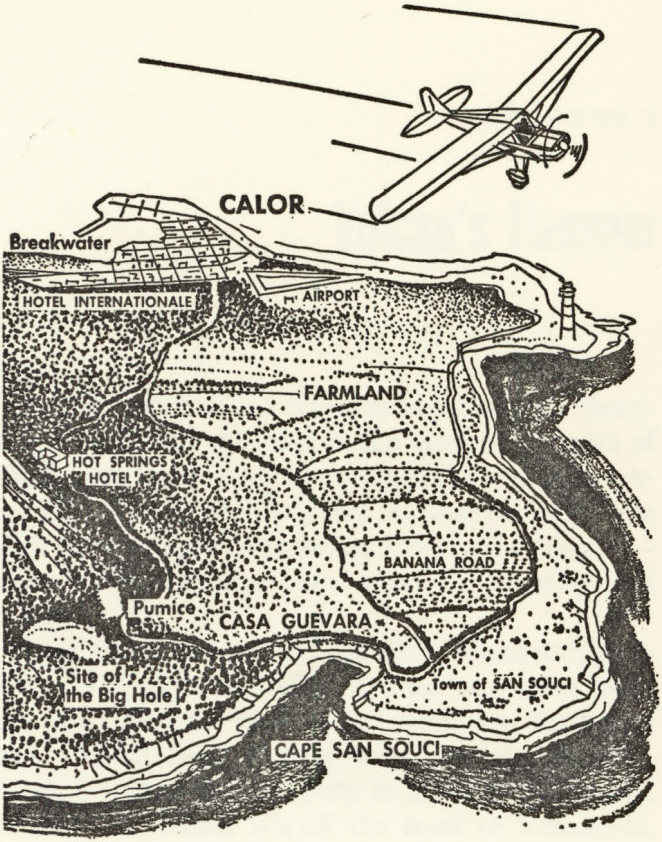
THE FLAMING MOUNTAIN



Rick and Scotty's scale



model of San Luz Island

CHAPTER I

Vulcan's Hammer

THE entire staff of the world-famed Spindrift Scientific Foundation gathered in the conference room of the big gray laboratory building on the southeast corner of Spindrift Island. It was unusual for the whole staff to be called to a meeting. Even more unusual—not a single member knew what the meeting was about.

Rick Brant, son of the Spindrift Foundation's director, Dr. Hartson Brant, was perhaps even more mystified than the professional scientists. His father had phoned from Florida with brief instructions. "Rick, I want you and Scotty to make a scale model of San Luz Island. It's off the coast of Venezuela. You'll find it on the sailing chart of the area, and there are references in the library. Be as complete and detailed as possible, and have the model ready by Saturday. Pick me up at Newark Airport Saturday noon. I'll have a guest. Ask Hobart Zircon to call a full staff meeting for two o'clock Saturday."

Rick and his pal Don Scott had completed the model, which was now resting on a table at the front of the lab conference room. One hour ago he had flown with Scotty in his plane, the Sky Wagon, to Newark Airport where he had picked up his father and a short, white-haired elderly man by the name of Dr. Esteben Balgos.

Rick, a teen-aged version of his long-legged, athletic father, was consumed with curiosity. He could tell that the scientist was deeply concerned over something. It seemed likely Dr. Balgos was at least involved in that concern, if not the actual cause. But Rick still knew of nothing that would relate Spindrift Island off the coast of New Jersey to San Luz, an island off the coast of northern South America.

The Spindrift scientists were gathering, pausing to examine the model on the table before they took their seats. Hobart Zircon, the huge, bearded senior physicist and associate director of the Foundation, looked at the model in company with Tony Briotti, the youthful staff archaeologist. Dr. Howard Shannon, chief biologist, came in with Julius Weiss, the famous mathematical physicist.

A slender, attractive dark-haired girl, Rick's own age, moved through the crowd to his side. He gave her a smile of welcome. Jan Miller was the daughter of one of the staff physicists, Dr. Walter Miller.

"What's all this about, Rick?" Jan asked. "And where are Barby and Scotty?"

"I wish I knew what it's all about," Rick replied. "Barby and Scotty are at the house with Dad's guest,

a Dr. Esteben Balgos. We picked Dad and Balgos up at Newark an hour ago. They'll be over in a few minutes." Rick had come to the lab ahead of the others to be sure there were sufficient chairs set up and that the model was in position on the table.

"You must have some idea," the girl insisted. "You and Scotty made the model."

"Sure we did. But we don't know why. Dad called from the University of Florida and gave instructions, and I didn't have a chance to ask any questions."

"It must be important," Jan commented. "The whole staff hasn't been together since Christmas."

Rick nodded. That had been a social occasion, not business, and on the day after Christmas he, Scotty, and Dr. Parnell Winston had taken off for Cairo where they had become involved in intrigue and a major scientific mystery. The episode was now referred to as *The Egyptian Cat Mystery.* The boy wondered if this meeting was a beginning of something exciting, too, and in the same instant he was sure that it was.

"Here comes Barby," Jan said suddenly. "Excuse me, Rick."

Barby Brant, Rick's pretty blond sister, paused in the doorway until she saw Jan hurrying to meet her. The two girls conferred briefly, then hurried to take seats in the exact center of the front row.

It was the custom at Spindrift to include the island's young people in staff activities, and Rick had been a part of the various projects and discussions since he could remember. But not until Jan Miller's

arrival on the island, during the adventure of *The Electronic Mind Reader,* had Barby bothered to attend the scientific discussions. Jan, as bright as she was attractive, had succeeded in persuading Rick's sister that science was not only exciting, but understandable.

The buzz of talk in the room stopped as Hartson Brant and his guest entered, followed by Scotty. The husky, dark-haired ex-Marine at once joined Rick. The two had been close friends and constant companions since the day Scotty joined the staff during *The Rocket's Shadow* project. An orphan, Scotty was now a permanent member of the Spindrift family.

Hartson Brant did not need to rap for attention. There was an expectant hush as he began immediately. "Our guest today is Dr. Esteben Balgos, of whom many of you have heard. Until his retirement a few years ago, he was considered by his colleagues as the dean of South American geophysicists. His primary field of interest was—and still is—volcanology."

Rick leaned forward. Volcanology, study of volcanoes. The mountain that formed the backbone of San Luz had once been a volcano, but it had been dead or inactive since prehistoric times. El Viejo—the Old One—was its name. Rick wondered if it might not be the connecting link between San Luz and Spindrift, but he couldn't yet see how.

"Dr. Balgos reached me at Florida University while I was lecturing there. We talked, and I agreed that we would examine his problem. It is so unusual

and challenging that I wanted all of you to hear what he has to say. Rick and Scotty have built a scale model of the island to help Dr. Balgos describe the problem to us."

"So that's why we built it," Scotty whispered. "I've been wondering."

Rick grinned. So had he.

Dr. Balgos acknowledged Hartson Brant's introduction, took a moment to wipe his horn-rimmed spectacles, and got down to business, using a pencil as a pointer. He spoke perfect English with a soft, musical Spanish accent which Rick found pleasant.

"This, young ladies and colleagues, is San Luz. I retired to this island from my native Peru a few years ago, so it is now my home. Its relationship to South America is the same as that of Bermuda to the east coast of your country. In other words, it is an island vacation resort. There are about 32,000 people on San Luz, engaged in caring for tourists, in fishing, in farming bananas and cacao, and in digging and exporting pumice."

Rick knew this from his research. He hoped Dr. Balgos wouldn't linger too long over descriptions.

"The tourist facilities are along the south coast, which is one continuous beach, starting at the main town of Calor, and running to Redondo, a fishing village at the northern tip of the island. There are several excellent hotels and guest homes."

Dr. Balgos pointed with his pencil to a cluster of buildings at the base of the mountain. "The location of this hotel is an exception. It is called the Hot

Springs Hotel, and it is one of our biggest. It is named for the hot springs at the base of the mountain. You will see at once that El Viejo—this mountain—is clearly a volcano. The presence of hot springs at its base indicates that it is not entirely dead."

Now they were getting somewhere, Rick thought.

"Starting a few months ago, earthquakes in the vicinity began to increase in frequency. Since we are on the edge of a major geological fault, earthquakes are not at all unusual, and the increase attracted little attention. However, I have corresponded with seismologists throughout the area, and it is clear that the increase is due to activity directly under our island."

The Peruvian scientist held up his pencil, like a teacher addressing a class. "I see that you consider this significant. So do I. There is one other bit of information that is also significant. The flow from the hot springs has changed in character. There is an occasional outpouring of hydrogen sulfide and sulfur dioxide. Also, the average temperature of the springs has gone up several degrees."

The area must smell pretty bad, Rick thought. Hydrogen sulfide was what gave the characteristic aroma to rotten eggs, and sulfur dioxide wasn't exactly perfume. He wasn't surprised when Dr. Balgos added that the hotel had been virtually abandoned.

"My data is not sufficient for any conclusion, but the general one that some kind of volcanic activity is increasing. However, I'm sure most of you depend,

as I do, on intuition as well as on data. This intuition is simply the result of years of experience. Mine tells me that El Viejo is about to become active again."

There was a murmur from the scientists.

"I am aware," Balgos went on, "that this is a conclusion which cannot yet be supported. But I am certain in my own mind that such is the case. I do not believe the present mild activity causing the earthquakes will subside. But more than that, I believe the activity will grow in a particularly disastrous way."

The scientist pointed to the volcano. "I have examined this cone. It is ancient, covered with jungle growth. It is clearly stable. The crater is filled in with compacted, weathered lava. If there should be a normal eruption, it would have to vent through the hot springs, which is the only active channel. Notice that the town of Calor would then be right in line with the eruption."

Rick could see it clearly. The contours of the terrain were such that a lava flow of any magnitude would engulf the little city.

"I believe the volcano will vent through the hot springs," Balgos went on. "But my examination of the volcano leads me to expect that it will vent with fantastic violence. The hot-springs channel is purely seepage. There is no open vent. This means the mountain will resist the growing forces under it until it is forced to give with great suddenness. To be as concise as possible, what I see here is another Krakatoa."

There was a concerted gasp from the assembled

group. Rick felt his scalp prickle. He had expected nothing like this. Krakatoa, he knew from his reading, had been the greatest cataclysm in recorded history. The volcano, in the East Indies, had blown up with enormous violence. The island on which it was located had been literally blasted to bits; nothing was left. Nearby islands were blazed clean. No one knew how many people had perished instantly. The blast was felt completely around the world, and the dust of Krakatoa had so filled the world's skies that the weather was changed. Winters came earlier and stayed longer, until the dust settled at last.

"This is our problem," Balgos said simply. "It is made more difficult by two things, our people and our politics. The people are superstitious fatalists. I know them too well to expect that they will move from the island. And where would they move? San Luz is claimed by three countries: England, Colombia, and Venezuela. But we consider ourselves independent. We have our own legislature. We cannot go to any one country for help without acknowledging its sovereignty over us. We cannot go to all three at once, because the diplomatic difficulties of getting three nations together would take too much time. Besides, I do not know what any nation could do. And so, I come to you, on behalf of our governor, and of myself."

There was silence when Balgos finished. Then big Hobart Zircon boomed, "If we assume your conclusions are correct, what can be done? There is no way of stopping a volcanic eruption, much less an explo-

sion. Man is helpless before such natural forces. It would be easier to stop a hurricane than another Krakatoa."

Balgos shrugged. "I agree. Yet, can we stand by and wait without even making an attempt?"

"Certainly not," Hartson Brant replied. "First, we must develop more data. Dr. Balgos had said that his conclusions are based on intuition, and not facts. I, for one, trust his intuition. But we must know the exact situation before we can even begin to study the possibilities of doing something."

Tony Briotti objected. "Even with a study, what can be done? I'm not a physical scientist, so this is outside of my field. But I've never heard of anyone even attempting to change the direction of a lava flow, much less control an eruption."

Dr. Balgos spread his hands expressively. "In mythology, Vulcan was the blacksmith, the god of fire and volcanoes. We have grown too wise to believe in myths, but we do believe in the scientific method. I come to you, as some of its most famous practitioners. If anything can be done—and I do not know if it can—then you are the scientific team that can do it. If you can do nothing, then San Luz will die, violently, under Vulcan's hammer!"

CHAPTER II

San Luz

RICK BRANT awoke slowly. For a moment he lay with eyes closed while he tried to identify the strange odor that smote his nostrils. It was a noxious combination of medicine, burned matches, and ancient eggs. Then he remembered, and sat bolt upright in bed.

San Luz! The smell of the hot springs burned his nose even through the air-conditioning system. It must be awful outside, he thought. It had been bad enough last night.

He looked over to the other bed in the luxurious room and saw Scotty, wrapped like a cocoon in sheet and blanket. For a moment he was tempted to heave a pillow at the ex-Marine, then reconsidered. Scotty needed sleep. Let him wake up naturally.

Rick lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes. He could do with a little more shut-eye himself. So much had happened in the past few days that he was still spinning from the speed of it.

The arrival of Dr. Esteben Balgos had upset Spindrift more thoroughly than anything else Rick could remember. He and Scotty had sat through hours of argument and heated debate. Jan and Barby had given up when the scientific arguments got far beyond their ability to understand. Rick hadn't understood much either, but he had stuck it out to the end.

The conclusion was that probably nothing could be done. There was simply no way to check the eruption of a volcano. If El Viejo was going to blow its top, well . . . that was that. But the Spindrift Scientific Foundation was not known for its eagerness to drop seemingly insoluble problems, so the staff had agreed that a study should be made, at the very least.

Hartson Brant had chosen Hobart Zircon and Julius Weiss to work with him, then he had persuaded an old friend, Dr. Jeffrey Williams, to drop his work for a short time and join the party. Dr. Williams was a noted seismologist. From the U. S. Geological Survey, Hartson Brant had borrowed Dr. David Riddle, a geologist with considerable experience in volcanology.

The scientific team departed at once for San Luz, leaving Rick and Scotty to bring up the rear. The boys loaded scientific equipment into the Sky Wagon and took off for San Luz. It took three days for the little plane to make the trip, the longest flight of Rick's flying career. Only once before had he flown so far over water, and then only to the Virgin Islands. The plane had made it easily, but he and Scotty had sweated it out.

Ordinarily, Hartson Brant would have taken the boys by commercial air, but he wanted Rick's plane on hand. Since the senior scientist did not know what difficulties the scientists might encounter, he wanted a way of making aerial surveys and photographs, plus ready communication with the mainland and nearby islands.

The boys had arrived early the evening before, only to be whisked to the Executive Mansion where the governor of San Luz, the Honorable Luis Montoya, was holding a reception for the visiting scientists.

The governor, a charming little man who looked like Rick's idea of a Spanish grandee, knew why the scientists were there, of course. But the secret was confined to the governor himself and to Balgos. Even Jaime Guevara, the lieutenant governor, did not know.

The agreement was that the scientific group would seem to be interested only in the hot springs. The purpose of their visit, the governor had announced to the local press and radio, was to investigate the change in the springs that had ruined a principal San Luz resort hotel.

By ten o'clock, when the reception ended, the boys were exhausted. But the end was not yet. They were riding in Zircon's jeep—five jeeps had been assigned to the party by the governor—and Zircon had to meet the last member of the party, Bradley Connel, a geologist borrowed from an oil company in Caracas, Venezuela, by Dr. Balgos.

It was nearly midnight before the boys got to

sleep, after nearly three days with minimum rest. So, both were tired. In the middle of thinking how tired he was, Rick dropped off to sleep again.

He awoke with Scotty's voice in his ears. "Come on, old buddy. Dad's calling a staff meeting in fifteen minutes."

Rick sat up. "How do you know?"

"Didn't you hear the phone ring? Boy, you must be tired! Let's go. Time for a quick shower and coffee. I've had mine."

Rick saw that a breakfast tray was on a bedside table. He had slept through Scotty's arising, shower, and delivery of breakfast. He shook his head, still groggy.

A quick shower woke him up. He sipped coffee and ate toast while getting into his clothes, then the two hurried down the corridor of the luxury hotel to the conference room Hartson Brant had taken over as headquarters.

The scientists were already there, taking seats around the room as the boys walked in.

Rick looked at the new faces. It was the first time he had seen them in daylight. Dr. Jeffrey Williams was a plump, round-faced man with a shock of pure-white hair. Dr. David Riddle was tall, dark, lean, and heavily tanned. He looked like a mining engineer, or perhaps a forest ranger. Bradley Connel was short, heavy set, with straw-colored hair and the kind of complexion that is always sunburned and peeling so long as the days are hot—which meant always, this close to the equator.

"Let's get to work," Hartson Brant said. "It's obvious that visual inspection is not going to tell us much. We'll have to get tracings before we have any real idea of what's going on under us. Dave, have you found anything of importance?"

David Riddle shook his head. "It's a typical formation. Nothing unusual about it at all. El Viejo is simply a dead volcano, its cone filled in, and plenty of jungle on the slopes. The hot springs are just a seepage point, as Dr. Balgos knows. So far as I can tell, they're the weakest point, so if the mountain lets go, that is where the blowoff will come. Of course, this could be wrong and there may be weaker channels we don't suspect. We'll know when we start shooting."

Hartson Brant looked at Dr. Williams. "Anything to add, Jeff?"

"Not much. I've gone over the seismic data Esteben got from the seismologists in the area, and it's clear that the epicenter of most recent earthquakes in the area is right under us. Something is happening down in the earth under the mountain, but I can't say what it is. It may be volcanism or it may be a fault shifting."

Rick knew that a fault was like a great crack in the earth's structure, but he had thought the scientists had agreed that the earthquakes were caused by volcanic action. He asked, "Sir, doesn't the change in the springs mean something?"

"Perhaps, Rick," Dr. Williams answered. "We don't really know. Dr. Balgos thinks they mean a great

deal, and I have respect for his opinions. But I'm only a seismologist. I have to depend on traces from earthquakes, and the traces tell us nothing but the single fact that something is going on far below."

Hartson Brant nodded. "The answer will depend on more data, so today we'll start to collect it. Rick and Scotty brought apparatus, and the governor has supplied us with dynamite and two experienced helpers, Ruiz and Honorario."

"How do we split up?" Julius Weiss asked.

"Into firing and recording teams. Since we have only two recorders, we can have only two teams for data collection. But we can have three firing parties. Dave Riddle will work with Honorario, Brad Connel with Ruiz, and Hobart Zircon with Rick and Scotty. Julius, you and I will form one recording party, and Esteben and Jeff will form the other. Each team will have a jeep. Now, if you'll all gather around this model the boys made, we'll pick approximate locations for stations."

The boys had brought the model with them. Now the group gathered around and discussed the best locations for both firing and recording parties.

Dave Riddle was assigned a station on the slope of El Viejo near the town of Redondo on the north end of the island. Brad Connel was given a location on the northwestern slope, and Zircon and the boys were shown a position on the west near the place where pumice, a foamy volcanic rock, was mined. Hartson Brant and Julius Weiss were to place one recording station on the eastern slope of the mountain,

while Dr. Williams and Dr. Balgos were assigned a station on the northern coast.

Hartson Brant handed a wrist chronometer to each team leader. Each team was also to have a transit, with which to take bearings for the purpose of locating the stations with precision.

"The hotel restaurant has packed lunches for us," Hartson Brant stated. "If we get under way at once, we can start shooting at one o'clock. Let's try for three shots each this afternoon. Each firing team will move one mile in a clockwise direction between shots, and we'll need to space the shots fifteen minutes apart. Hobart, you'll start shooting at 1:00, Brad at 1:15, Dave at 1:30. At 2:00, we'll start the cycle over again. That should bring us all back to the hotel by suppertime."

Big Hobart Zircon clapped the boys on the shoulder. "Let's get going. Scotty, you pick up our lunches. Rick, we'll load equipment."

The five jeeps were lined up outside. Rick carried out a transit, the tripod slung over his shoulder, and found the two local helpers waiting. Ruiz was a short, swarthy man with gleaming white teeth and a Mexican-style sombrero. Honorario was only slightly taller, and so thin a strong breeze would blow him away. The two San Luzians greeted him courteously. *"Buenos días, señor."*

Rick knew enough Spanish to be equally polite. *"Buenos días, señores. Cómo están ustedes?"*

The two switched to English. Rick hoped it wasn't a reflection on his Spanish accent, acquired at White-

side High School the year before. "We are well, señor," Ruiz answered, and Honorario added, "We hope you will enjoy San Luz, señor."

Rick said that he expected to enjoy it very much indeed. He wondered if the two knew that their mountain was getting ready to blow its top. He asked, "Do you have the dynamite, *amigos*?"

"In the shed, señor. Also the caps and the detonators. If you will come, I will show you." Ruiz gestured toward a concrete shed that stood some distance away.

"What was the shed used for?" Rick asked as they walked toward it.

"It is a shed for a pump, señor. The pump is for the hotel's water, which must be brought up the hill from Calor."

In a moment Rick saw for himself. The pump was operating noisily. Along one wall were shelves, one of which contained two cases of dynamite and boxes of caps. On another shelf were three detonators. He selected one, then picked out six sticks of dynamite. He handled the stuff gingerly, even though he knew it was safe as so much soap. Dynamite, for all its explosive power, is stable stuff, and difficult to set off by accident.

The dynamite caps were much less safe, however. Each was packed carefully in its own protective wrapping, but Rick took no chances. He put each one in a different pocket. Then, feeling like a keg of gunpowder with a sputtering fuse, he walked back to the jeep.

Hobart Zircon and Scotty came out of the hotel as he approached.

"Stand back," Rick said grimly. "I may go off like the Black Tom explosion if you touch me."

Big Hobart Zircon chuckled. "Don't worry, Rick. If you do, we'll go off with you. Would it make you happier if I carried the explosives?"

Rick considered. "It doesn't matter," he said. "If the stuff goes off, we'll all go into orbit at the same time and the jeep will go with us. Let's go."

Scotty looked at him curiously. "Where are the caps?"

Rick patted his pockets one at a time. "One in each breast pocket and one in my watch pocket. Don't push me around, buddy. I'm loaded."

Scotty grinned. "I'll keep my distance."

The rest of the party was loading jeeps now, too. Scotty hoisted the equipment and lunches into the back of the jeep and got in with them. Rick climbed gingerly into the front passenger seat and Zircon got ready to drive. He handed Rick a map. "You navigate. Our first destination is marked with a cross. We start out on the road leading west from the hotel. That will take us to the pumice works."

"Okay," Rick began, but he never finished. The jeep began to rock under him. For an insane instant he thought it must have a perfectly silent motor, then he realized Zircon had not yet turned on the ignition switch. Sudden dizziness made him clutch at the seat, and instinctively he clapped an arm across his chest to protect the dynamite caps.

He was vaguely conscious of yells from around him, and he struggled to sit up straight. His stomach was churning and he felt nauseated. Zircon let out a bellow like a wounded steer.

From inside the hotel Rick heard the sudden crash of shattering glass and gripped the jeep seat tighter with his free hand.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, it was over. He straightened up, dizzy. "Wh-what happened?" he asked shakily.

He heard Dr. Balgos. "A warning, my friends. The most serious one yet." He pointed up to where the peak of El Viejo loomed. "The Old One must be working faster than I thought."

"But what was it?" Rick asked again and at the same time was afraid that he knew.

"Earthquake," Zircon boomed. He pointed.

Rick stared. In a zigzag line across the hotel parking lot was a fissure, one that hadn't been there a minute before. The concrete gaped in widths varying from a crack to a few inches.

The earth had opened up!

CHAPTER III

Firing Parties

IT WAS a shaken group of scientists that moved off in their jeeps to the preselected stations. Most of the adults had experienced earthquakes before, but none had seen the earth split almost at their feet. To Rick, the sensation had been as upsetting as any he had ever experienced.

"The one thing we learn to depend on," Zircon said, "is that the earth under our feet is solid and dependable. When it shakes like a jelly, it causes a kind of emotional shock, apart from any physical damage it may do."

"It certainly did with me," Rick agreed.

"Ditto," Scotty added.

Zircon put the jeep in gear and moved away from the hotel. He drove slowly over the narrow part of the crack in the parking lot, then picked up speed. Rick looked around. Bradley Connel and Ruiz were following in their own vehicle.

Zircon took a blacktop road to the west, close to

the base of the mountain. Fortunately for Rick's peace of mind, the road was fairly smooth. He had never carried dynamite caps before, but he knew they contained fulminate of mercury, which is one of the most unstable and violent chemical substances, pound for pound, ever created.

The big scientist sensed his uneasiness. "Relax, Rick. Those caps won't go off without a substantial knock against something. Enjoy the scenery."

Rick grinned. "I'll try."

The scenery was tropical. Once away from the hotel grounds, there was heavy growth, vines, creepers, and broad-leafed plants. He saw palmetto and wild banana interspersed with Judas palms and other typical vegetation. The growth clung to the side of El Viejo like a thick green carpet. Now and then the jeep passed an open space in the vegetation and he saw the plains stretching away to the sea on his left.

The jeep climbed gradually and Rick realized that their direction had changed. They were now heading on the more northerly course. The vegetation was thinner, too, and he guessed it was because they were higher up the mountainside. At a rough estimate, the jeep had climbed nearly a thousand feet.

"Pumice quarry ahead," Zircon announced.

Rick saw ramshackle wooden buildings, then piles of grayish rock. A hundred yards farther on he saw an open pit. This was where the San Luzians mined pumice for export.

"Is there much of a market for it?" Scotty asked.

"Not as much as there was years ago," Zircon re-

plied. "Pumice, as you probably know, is volcanic rock. But not an ordinary one. It's a kind of foamy lava honeycombed with gas bubbles. It's used as an abrasive. Modern industrial products have replaced it in general use, but apparently there's still enough demand so that the San Luzians are able to export a little. Our firing station is about a mile from here."

Rick looked at the rough terrain. "Think we can get through?"

"Easily. According to the map, we have an unpaved road part of the way."

The unpaved road turned out to be a pair of wagon tracks. But at least there were no trees in the way. Rick held on tight as Zircon shifted into four-wheel drive and forged ahead.

The big scientist kept an eye on his odometer, or mileage counter, while the boys watched for a clearing. It was slightly over a mile before they found one, and Zircon pulled off the road to let Brad Connel and Ruiz go by.

The jeep stopped as the two came abreast and the geologist called, "Want to trade stations?"

"We like this one," Zircon replied with a grin.

"Don't blame you. I have another three miles through this stuff. Well, so long."

The jeep started off and was soon lost as the path curved slightly.

Zircon looked at his watch. "Plenty of time, but we might as well get ready."

A few minutes search disclosed a spot far enough away from the clearing for safety, with no trees to be

uprooted by the blast. Zircon took two of the dynamite sticks Rick carried and one of the caps. He placed the cap over one stick and used a special tool, like a jar opener, to crimp it into place.

"This is the only really delicate part of the operation," he said. "If the crimpers slip, they could set off the cap and the dynamite. So be careful when you do it. Keep the crimpers low on the flange of the cap."

He found a rubber band in his pocket and used it to hold the two sticks together. A coil of wire was produced next, and the connection made to the dynamite cap. Zircon dug a shallow hole with his heel and put the dynamite sticks in, then backed off unwinding wire as he went.

The detonator had been left in the jeep. Rick got it and carried it to where Zircon waited with the pair of wires.

"How does this thing work?" Scotty asked.

"It's a dynamo," Zircon replied. "When the handle is pushed down it engages gears that spin a flywheel, which operates the dynamo long enough to send an electrical charge through the wires."

"So don't sit on the handle," Rick joked.

"And don't kick it," Scotty added.

Zircon connected the wires to a pair of terminals on top of the detonator, then looked at his watch. "Plenty of time. We might as well take it easy. Anyone hungry?"

No one was. It was too soon after breakfast. Instead, Rick took the opportunity to ask questions.

"I can understand the general principle of what we're doing, but can you tell us exactly what happens?"

"Sure. When the dynamite charge goes off, it sends shock waves through the earth in all directions. Whenever a shock wave strikes something of different density, its direction and velocity change. For instance, if there is denser rock a few hundred feet down, that will cause a change of both velocity and direction. With me so far?"

"I think so," Scotty said. "The denser the stuff the wave strikes, the faster it moves. Like sound waves. I mean, sound moves faster in water than in air, and faster in a steel rail than in water. Is it the same?"

"Just about," Zircon agreed. "The shock waves radiate away from us, through the earth, and eventually reach the recorders on the other side of the mountain. You can see what happens, I think. Waves will arrive at different times, depending on the path they took and the kind of material they went through."

Rick nodded. "So if there's molten rock, or magma somewhere in the way, the shock wave that goes through it will slow down and arrive at the recorder later?"

"That's it. The tracings we get can be analyzed to give us a kind of cross-sectional look at the mountain. You see, we know how fast the waves travel through different kinds of earth structure. Also, we will know the point of the explosion and the location

of the recorder for each shot. Which reminds me. We'd better get out the equipment and locate ourselves precisely."

"How?" Rick asked. "What will we use for landmarks?"

"The top of the mountain, for one, and if you'll look carefully to a point slightly south of east between those two banana palms, you'll see the top of the control tower at the airport."

Rick shook his head. "Good thing you're with us. I completely forgot to watch for landmarks."

"That was the first thing I had in mind in looking for a spot," Zircon told him.

The transit gave a precise angle between the two landmarks. Zircon drew a line on the map connecting the southern tip of the mountain and the airport tower. Then, with that as his base line, it was easy to draw two lines at the correct angles from each of the points. The transit's position was where the two lines intersected.

By the time the scientist had finished, it was nearly one o'clock. The three walked to the detonator. "Pull the handle up," Zircon directed. Rick did so. "I'll count down from ten seconds. Push down on zero."

It was like the countdown for a rocket firing, Rick thought. Zircon called out the time starting at one minute, then called off the last ten seconds. As he reached zero, Rick pushed the handle home.

The dynamite went off with a roar that sent leaves and dirt flying, and Rick felt the shock wave slam against his ears with stunning force.

"Open your mouth next time," Zircon said. "I forgot to warn you." He was already reeling in the wire. "Let's get going. One mile farther on for the next shot."

At the next station the same procedure was repeated, but before it was time, there was a far-off explosion. Zircon looked at his watch. "Brad Connel. Right on time." In another fifteen minutes there was an even more distant sound as David Riddle's first shot went off. They ate their lunch and listened to the echo off the mountain.

Zircon and the boys were ready when their time came. Location this time had been made on sightings toward the mountain, and a flagpole at Cape San Souci on the western side of the island.

The road petered out and they were forced to go cross-country to reach the third shot station. Fortunately, Brad Connel had left a path of crushed vegetation, so it was only necessary to follow where he had led.

After the third shot, the three collected their equipment and drove back to the hotel.

They were the first back. All three were sticky from the heat, and somewhat insect bitten. By unanimous consent they headed for the showers.

Rick dressed except for his shoes, then stretched out on his bed. He wondered what the day's work would show. The memory of the earthquake was still fresh, and he was anxious to see if it had come from rising magma far below, or from some other source. He had a mental image of white-hot rock rising slug-

gishly, melting a path to the surface. Now and then the magma struck water, or gas-producing minerals, and then there was a tightly held explosion that made the earth shudder.

Well, it was probably like that, from what he had read about volcanic action. Anyway, he could do without earthquakes. They were unnerving.

Scotty finished dressing, and Rick slipped on his shoes. It was time for the others to be back. Connel should have arrived only a few minutes behind them, but it would take longer for the others because they had gone around the mountain in the other direction.

The boys walked to the staff conference room and found Hartson Brant and Julius Weiss. The two were busy unrolling long strips of paper covered with blue shadings.

"Find anything yet?" Rick asked his father.

"No. We're just getting ready to take a look. How did it go?"

"No trouble. Zircon must still be in the shower. Probably Connel is, too. He must have been right behind us."

The scientists started poring over the traces.

"Here's your first shot," Hartson Brant said. He pointed to where a series of squiggles began. Rick could see nothing of interest. All the pen marks looked about the same to him. It would take expert analysis to make anything out of them.

The boys left the scientists to their work and wandered out into the parking lot. "I want to take a closer look at that crack," Rick said.

"Same here. Suppose it goes to China?"

Rick grinned at his pal. "That's a myth. If you drilled a hole straight down through the center of the earth from here you wouldn't come out anywhere near China. You'd be in the Southern Hemisphere."

"Don't get technical on me, boy."

The crack, however, went down only about three feet, gradually narrowing until it was closed. Even so, it was impressive. Rick knew that the actual break must continue down into the earth for some distance, perhaps for hundreds of feet. The force it took to shake the earth like that was awesome. Again he was reminded sharply of the kind of forces against which the Spindrift group was trying to contend, and he felt for the first time that the job was completely hopeless. What could mere men do?

A horn honking wildly brought him to quick attention. He turned and saw a jeep coming along the western road into the parking lot. Brad Connell But where was Ruiz? Then, as the jeep neared, Rick saw. The San Luzian was lashed to an improvised stretcher lying across the back of the jeep!

The geologist drew to a stop, his face chalky.

"Get a doctor!" he shouted. "Quickly! Ruiz got caught in the last explosion. I think he's dead!"

CHAPTER IV

Seismic Tracings

Ruiz, the short, friendly San Luzian, was not dead, but he was only barely alive. Within a half hour he was on his way to the hospital at Calor, crushed and unconscious.

Brad Connel was badly shaken. "I thought he was behind me," the geologist explained. "But he had gone back to check the cap connection. At least, that's what he must have gone back for. I fired, then turned around, and he wasn't there. He was blown fifty feet at least. If only I had checked! But he was there with me, and I just kept my eye on the chronometer. He didn't say anything. He just walked off."

There was nothing much to be said. It was the kind of accident that seems absolutely senseless. Both Connel and Ruiz were old hands with explosives, yet the San Luzian apparently had wandered back to the charge just as it went off.

Rick and Scotty walked toward the hot springs behind the hotel and talked it over.

"Pretty stupid thing for anyone to do," Scotty said soberly.

Rick agreed. "Especially an old hand. Ruiz was supposed to be experienced, but I can't imagine how a veteran could pull a stunt like that."

It made absolutely no sense. Ruiz spoke English. Rick knew that from his conversation with the San Luzian. So he must have known Connel was counting down, getting ready to push the plunger home. Why would he walk into the blast, unless he was tired of living? But he didn't believe Ruiz would try to get himself killed deliberately. The little San Luzian had seemed like a sane, happy individual.

Rick gave up. Maybe when Connel calmed down a little he could shed more light on the accident. "The smell from the springs is getting pretty strong," Scotty remarked.

It certainly was. The wind had been from the hotel toward the hot springs most of the day, and the odor hadn't been bad. Now, in the vicinity of the springs, it was making Rick's eyes water and his nose smart.

"Think we can get close enough for a look?" Rick asked.

"We can try. There's the building ahead."

A cement walk led from the hotel to the springs, rising up a gradual incline that was not too steep for wheel chairs, or for the elderly. The boys had heard that many invalids had come here, to bathe in the hot springs, to drink the mineral water, and to soak in warm mud.

"How'd you like a nice hot mud bath?" Rick asked.

Scotty grinned. "Can't say it appeals to me, but there must be something to it. There are mud baths and hot springs in Europe, too. With plenty of customers."

Rick took out his handkerchief and dried eyes that were watering from the fumes. He doubted that the gases were good for them, but he was curious. He wanted to see where the volcano would blow its top, if it was going to.

In spite of the irritating fumes, they persisted and got a quick look at the former health area. There was a series of pools for bathers, ranging from big ones for large groups to individual tublike affairs, all nicely tiled. There was one area of mud baths. Rick had an impression of two areas, one of bubbling mud, the other of steaming water. It was enough. The boys turned and got out of there.

Back at the hotel, the scientists were working. All were present, except for Brad Connel, who had asked to be excused. He was in his room, apparently still badly upset over the accident.

Dr. Jeffrey Williams had obtained a large sheet of paper and had sketched an outline of the volcano and the earth under it as seen in cross section. As Hartson Brant read off data from the day's tracings, Dr. Williams plotted points far underground. Now and then he connected points, or put in a light line.

Rick and Scotty watched with interest. The tracings meant nothing to them; analysis was a job for

trained scientists. But Dr. Williams was slowly producing a picture on the paper.

"That's all," Hartson Brant said finally. "How does it look, Jeff?"

The seismologist shook his head. "Not good." He held his pencil almost flat to the paper and began shading in an area bounded by the points he had made. "According to what we have, this is the shape of a magma front." He drew in other lines, rising vertically through the earth into the volcano. "Apparently these discontinuities indicate old channels, now filled in. Notice that the magma is not following the original channels. This seems to confirm what Esteben has been telling us."

The volcanologist nodded. "It seems to. Jeff, do you have any doubt about this area being magma?"

"I'm afraid not. The data fits. Of course it's still pretty far below the surface."

Rick could see that the ominous shading was nearly twice as far underground as the top of the volcano was above sea level.

Julius Weiss spoke up. "The next step is to find out how fast the magma is rising."

"A series of shots every day for the next few days should tell us that," Hartson Brant agreed. "Hobart, you've been pretty quiet. Any comments?"

"None of any importance," the big physicist boomed. "Only this: what can we possibly do about a situation like this?"

Hartson Brant shrugged. "I don't know. At least we can keep track of the magma."

David Riddle, the geologist, added, "It will allow time to warn the population. I can see no other means of saving them except to get them off the island."

Rick had reached the same conclusion. It didn't take a scientist to realize the gravity of the situation. El Viejo was getting ready for something big, unless the magma subsided. Since no one was really sure about the physics of volcanology, no one had a good guess why the volcanic action had begun again. No one could be sure it would not decrease, either.

"This picture is pretty rough," Dr. Williams said. "I'll refine it a little after dinner, Hartson. It will give us a better basis for plotting tomorrow's results."

"Good idea," Hartson Brant agreed. "And speaking of dinner, it's about time. Let's wash up and meet in the dining room in a half hour."

"Better call Brad Connel," Zircon said. "I know how upset he must be, but it will be better if he joins us and eats something."

Rick and Scotty returned to their room and washed for dinner. Both were quiet. The appearance of the magma under them, almost like a mushroom cloud in shape, was pretty ominous. Like sitting on a volcano, Rick thought. It was the most appropriate expression he could think of. No wonder the earth had split.

Scotty mused aloud. "Rock. Melting like butter on a stove. Thousands of tons of it. Makes you appreciate natural forces, doesn't it?"

"Even hydrogen bombs are pretty feeble by comparison," Rick agreed. "It makes me uneasy to think of all that stuff boiling up under us."

"I caught myself looking down a couple of times," Scotty said with a grin. "I wouldn't be surprised to see steam coming up through the rug."

Rick consulted his watch. "Maybe food will make us feel better. Come on. It's about time."

The scientific party was alone in the hotel, except for a reduced staff. The governor had made arrangements for the hotel to operate so that the visitors could have service. Rick almost wished they had stayed at a beach hotel with other people around them. The huge resort was like an abandoned city, with a few ghosts left in it.

They walked through the conference room on their way into dinner and found Connel looking over the sketch Williams had made. He looked up as they entered and greeted them casually.

"Hello, Rick, Scotty. I see we do have magma below us."

"That's what Dr. Williams said," Rick agreed. "How do you feel, Mr. Connel?"

The geologist shrugged. "How can I feel? Ruiz was —is—a nice little guy. I still don't know what happened, why he should walk back to the charge. I was concentrating on getting the charge off on time, and there was no reason for him to go back."

"You said he went to check the cap connection," Scotty reminded.

"It's the only reason I can think of, and it isn't a very good one. He made the connection himself. Maybe he wanted another quick look."

The geologist transferred his attention back to the

sketch. "The stuff is still pretty far down. Good thing, too. That will give time for evacuating the island. We've probably got several months yet."

The subject wasn't brought up during dinner, but over coffee Esteben Balgos commented, "We must keep the governor informed. Jeff, if you will lend me your sketch, I'll take it to the Executive Mansion first thing in the morning and bring it back before we begin shooting. I think the governor will want to start planning for evacuation, if he has not yet done so."

Williams nodded. "Help yourself, Esteben. I'll probably have the sketch in my room. Knock on the door in the morning if you want it."

The talk turned to heat-transfer mechanisms in the earth, and from there to the whole problem of solar-energy input and outflow. The subject was not one in which Rick had any background, and it wasn't long before he lost interest. Besides, he was still tired from the trip, and the day's events had added their own burden of fatigue.

Scotty yawned, and Rick took the opportunity to suggest, "Let's go to bed."

"I'm with you."

The boys excused themselves and in a short time were settled down for the night. Rick fell asleep almost instantly.

He awoke with Scotty shouting in his ear. "Let's go, Rick! Trouble!"

Rick was on his feet, into trousers and shoes before he was fully awake. Scotty had already dashed into the corridor. Rick joined him and the rest of the sci-

entists, who were standing in a group in front of Jeffrey Williams' room. The white-haired scientist was holding a handkerchief to a bloody bruise on his head. Rick hurried up just in time to hear him tell the group:

"I don't know what happened. My door wasn't locked, so anyone could have come in. I didn't see a soul. I must have dozed off."

"What's going on?" Rick demanded.

His father answered. "Someone came into Jeff's room and slugged him, apparently while he was dozing over the tracings. Both the tracings and the sketch are gone!"

CHAPTER V

Dynamite Missing

"THERE's only one reason I can think of why anyone would want to steal the tracings," Rick said. He held on for a moment as Zircon steered the jeep over a bump in the trail. "If word has leaked out about why we're really here, maybe someone in the tourist business would steal the evidence to keep business from being ruined."

Scotty spoke up from the rear seat. "There's one big fat flaw in that argument, boy. Would anyone care so much about business that he'd want to stay and be blown up? Who thinks more of business than he does of his own skin?"

Zircon chuckled. "There may be such people, but I suspect they're scarce."

Rick had to agree. He stared through the windshield at the tail of Brad Connel's jeep. The geologist was leading the way to the firing area, and he was alone. Hartson Brant had tried to assign one of the boys as a helper, but Connel had balked. He insisted

that he did not need a helper, that he was used to handling charges alone, that he did not want to take the risk of an accident like that of yesterday.

"Connel was pretty determined to go it alone," Rick remarked.

"He's upset over the accident to Ruiz," Zircon pointed out. "He probably feels bad because he couldn't see Ruiz when he visited the hospital."

Connel had gone into town with Dr. Balgos, and had paid a call at the Executive Mansion. While Balgos talked with Governor Montoya, recreating the stolen sketch from memory, Connel had been taken to the hospital by Lieutenant Governor Jaime Guevara. The hospital reported that Ruiz was on the danger list, his condition unchanged. He could have no visitors. Apparently both Guevara and Governor Montoya had tried to assure Connel that he should not be so depressed over what was obviously a freak accident.

The trio stopped at their first station, and Connel waved, then continued on his way. Rick watched him out of sight, then turned to go to work. He remembered what the geologist had said the night before.

"Connel figures we have months before the volcano blows," he remembered.

"What?" Zircon looked up sharply. "How did he arrive at that conclusion?"

"From Dr. Williams' sketch."

"Hmmm." The big scientist checked the detonator thoughtfully. "He must have figured on a straight upward flow of the magma. But from the shape of the

magma front, I think it's highly unlikely that it will progress in any such regular fashion. Instead, the front probably will increase erratically, but in a kind of progression. It may double its frontage at approximately regular periods."

Scotty scratched his chin. "Double its frontage, huh? What does that mean?"

"Maybe four hundred square feet today, eight hundred tomorrow, and sixteen hundred the day after. We won't know the rate of growth, or the time scale, until we've watched it for a while. But I talked with Balgos and Hartson last night at some length, and their opinion is that we probably have a couple of weeks, maybe even three or four. But not months."

Rick whistled. "That fast? When will we be sure?"

Zircon shrugged. "Can't tell. We'll keep shooting on a daily schedule, and perhaps in three or four days we'll see enough growth in the front to make an estimate. But even that can be misleading. If the magma strikes a softer area, it can grow even more rapidly. Our best bet will be to keep a daily watch from now on."

Rick looked up at the extinct cone of El Viejo. In his imagination he saw the top blow off in an earth-shaking explosion and millions of tons of white-hot lava spurt high in the air. Then, when the lava came down . . .

"We'd better get on the ball," he said. "Almost time for our first shot."

"Want to connect up?" Zircon asked.

"I guess so." Rick had never handled dynamite be-

fore, but there was no time like the present to get started. He took sticks from his pocket, then a cap. Zircon handed him the crimping tool. He put a cap in place; then, with infinite care, put the crimping tool in position. He took a deep breath and squeezed. Nothing happened, except that the cap was now held tightly.

Rick let his breath out and grinned. Zircon and Scotty grinned back.

"When you get real salty," Scotty said, "you'll crimp the caps on with your teeth."

"Ha!" Rick said. "And blow my head off?"

"It's possible," Zircon agreed. "It has happened. My advice is, don't try it. I've seen men do it, but it always gives me the shudders. Come on. Let's plant the charge and lay the wire."

The shots went off on schedule, and the party returned to the hotel. Later, in analyzing the shots and making a new sketch, Jeffrey Williams thought the magma front had grown slightly from the previous day, but since the first tracings were gone, there was no way of being sure.

David Riddle and Brad Connel walked in as he finished. The two, using respirators, had been to inspect the hot-springs area.

"Nothing new," Riddle reported. "The only sign of activity is a fresh outpouring of hydrogen sulfide. It's bubbling up through the mud, and it could be a pocket of gas that was suddenly released. The springs won't tell us much."

Hartson Brant said thoughtfully, "I'm afraid you're

right, Dave. Nothing for it but to keep shooting. And we'll lock up the papers at night, so we can keep track of what's going on. One thing we'd better do is start a survey of the entire cone, above the level where our shots give us information. I'd like to be sure we're not overlooking any new gaps or fissures in the mountain itself. But can we do it with the manpower we have available and still keep shooting?"

Rick spoke up. "I know how we can help, Dad. Scotty and I can handle our stations alone now. That will leave Dr. Zircon free for other things. Then, if we change stations with Brad Connel, and he takes the closer ones, he can get back a good hour earlier and do other work."

"No!" Brad Connel exploded.

Hartson Brant and the other scientists looked at him with surprise. "Why not?" Dr. Brant asked. "It seems like a sensible suggestion, Brad."

"It is," Connel said hurriedly. "It's just that . . . well, maybe I'm still too upset over that accident, but I know the terrain now, and these kids don't. They should stick to the stations where they've been operating, and I'll handle my own. It's just that I don't want any risks whatever. My own part of the mountain is a lot rougher, and they'd be carrying dynamite and caps over pretty bouncy trails. I don't like it. I think we should stick to our own stations."

The geologist obviously felt strongly about it, and Hartson Brant agreed. "Since you feel that way, Brad, we'll let things go as they are. Hobart, can the boys handle the shots?"

"Sure," Zircon stated. "As long as Rick doesn't crimp caps with his teeth. Of course if he does we'll still get a reading, but we may lose Rick."

"No danger," Rick retorted. "Besides, you wouldn't get a reading because the shot wouldn't be timed right."

Hartson Brant saw that the big scientist was joking. "If Rick feels adventurous he can kick mountain lions for sport instead. I'm told there are some on the mountain."

"Jaguars," Dr. Balgos offered. "Not your typical North American cats. These are much fiercer. They react faster to a kick—if you can get close enough to kick one."

Brad Connel laughed heartily. "The boys can lure 'em with catnip," he said.

Rick glanced at the geologist. The laugh hadn't rung true.

"I suggest we also save time by shooting in the early morning," Hartson Brant added. "That will leave the afternoon for other activities. Jeff, if you can manage to keep your head out of the way of blunt instruments, perhaps you'd like to make a better sketch of the magma front. We can assign the boys as guards, if you like."

Dr. Williams caressed the bruise on his head. "Not necessary, Hartson. I'll lock my door and keep my face toward the window. But for now, how about dinner?"

There was no disagreement.

After dinner, Rick and Scotty lingered over coffee

with Dr. Balgos, Julius Weiss, and Hartson Brant. The others had excused themselves and gone back to their rooms. The boys were trying to learn more about volcanoes, but the scientists had a tendency to get involved in discussions of some of the finer points of geophysics and long minutes would pass before Rick or Scotty could bring them back to the main point with a question.

In the midst of an interesting discussion of the Hawaiian volcanoes by Dr. Balgos, Honorario burst into the dining room and hurried to the Peruvian scientist. Rick couldn't follow the rapid Spanish, but Balgos jumped to his feet, his face white, and translated swiftly.

"Honorario says all the dynamite is gone!"

CHAPTER VI

Dangerous Trail

THE search for the missing dynamite had failed completely. Rick, Scotty, and the scientists were equally puzzled. Why steal dynamite? What was there to be gained?

At a conference early the following morning Hartson Brant voiced the question.

Julius Weiss was the first to respond, and his answer was another question. "What was to be gained by stealing the tracings and Jeff's sketch? Isn't the theft of the dynamite in the same category?"

"I suppose it is," Hartson Brant agreed. "I see no motive whatever for either theft. After all, it was simple enough to make additional tracings, and it will not be difficult to obtain more dynamite. So I go back to my original question. What is to be gained by the theft?"

"Dynamite has some value," Zircon boomed.

"To be sure. But the tracings had none, except to us."

Rick said what had been on his mind. "Both thefts resulted in only one thing . . . delay. The tracings put us a day behind, and the dynamite might delay us even longer. It depends on how fast we can get more."

"Maybe Rick has something there," David Riddle said. "But who gains from a delay in the project?"

"No one," Brad Connel said testily. "I think we're looking for a motive that doesn't exist. The tracings probably were stolen by someone on the hotel staff, because they looked important. Maybe the thief thought they could be sold. Certainly the dynamite can be sold. What motive do we need other than the usual profit a thief expects?"

"Perhaps none," Hartson Brant admitted. "The question is, what now? We can proceed no further without explosives."

"I will go to the governor and see if he can obtain more for us," Esteben Balgos announced. "If he has none here on San Luz, there are other islands close by. A few telephone calls will locate a supply."

"Fine. And while you're doing that, there is little the rest of us can do except relax. Will you let us know by telephone what the governor says?"

"Yes, at once. Any of you care to go with me?"

Williams and Riddle volunteered to go along. Weiss announced that he wanted to make some calculations and asked Hartson Brant and Zircon to help him.

Rick and Scotty, left on their own, considered the possibilities for amusement and found none except

the ocean itself—which was plenty. They decided on a swim and hurried back to their room to put on trunks under their slacks. Zircon readily gave permission to use the jeep.

As they changed clothes, a jeep motor roared into life. Scotty walked to the window and opened the draperies. "Balgos and the others," he announced.

A few minutes later another jeep motor started up. Rick went to the window and was just in time to see Brad Connel start across the parking lot in his jeep. He was alone.

The boy turned away from the window, very thoughtful. "That was Connel. Wonder where he's going?"

"Maybe to Calor, for shopping or sightseeing," Scotty replied. "What's on your mind?"

"He worries me," Rick said bluntly. "I don't really know why. Only he's certainly determined to keep us away from his firing stations, isn't he?"

"Go on. Something's biting you, and I want to know what it is."

Rick stared at his dark-haired pal without really seeing him. He struggled to put into words the vague thoughts in the back of his mind.

"Well, he acted worried about Ruiz, but I don't really think he was. It was kind of overdone, you know? His face didn't match his words."

Scotty shook his head. "You're on thin ice, boy. People don't react to accidents in a standard way. It might have been overdone, but it might not, too. What else?"

"He didn't want us to go along as helpers after Ruiz was hurt. I know that doesn't mean much, and he said he was just afraid of another accident, but wouldn't you think he'd like some company? Besides, two accidents like that just don't happen. Then, when we suggested changing stations so he could have more time to work on other things, he yelled pretty fast."

"Because we don't know his terrain," Scotty pointed out. "At least that's what he said."

"Sure. But what's to know about the terrain? All we'd have to do would be to follow his jeep tracks, and shoot where the ground is already torn up from his earlier shots. If it's safe for him to carry caps and dynamite, it's safe for us."

Scotty scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I see what you mean. But the evidence isn't very conclusive, is it?"

"No," Rick admitted. "Only where's he going now? If he planned to go to town, he'd invite anyone who wanted to go, wouldn't he? That's what most people would do."

Scotty chuckled. "One thing I like about you. When you get a notion in that noggin, it doesn't come out easily. Next you'll be suggesting that he slugged Williams and stole the dynamite."

"He could have," Rick pointed out. "Apparently he was alone in his room both times. At least no one said he was with them."

Scotty held up his hands in surrender. "Okay. What do we do about it?"

"Let's see where he's going."

"I knew it," Scotty said resignedly. "Okay. But we'd better hurry."

There was a clear view from the front of the hotel down the slopes of the foothills to the town of Calor. The road wound around and occasionally vanished from sight in clumps of green growth, but the boys watched for several minutes and saw no sign of Connel. The jeep with Balgos and the others was rolling along in the distance, but it was still close enough to see three occupants.

"He didn't go to town," Rick said finally, "and there's only one other road out of here."

"To the shot stations," Scotty agreed. "Unless he cut off and headed for San Souci." That was a little fishing village on the west coast. Neither boy had been there, but they had used a flagpole on the tip of the cape near the town as a sighting marker.

"Let's go see," Rick suggested.

They hurried through the hotel to the parking lot and got into the jeep. Rick started the vehicle, crossed the fissure in the lot, and took the road west. According to the map, the road was paved as far as the pumice works. Beyond that it was graded dirt. If Connel had taken the dirt road, instead of the trail to the shot stations, they should see dust.

He kept the jeep rolling at good speed as far as the pumice-works shacks, then stopped to look for signs of a dust haze. There was none. At the end of the blacktop, he and Scotty got out and examined the road surface. There were signs of traffic, but none

very recent so far as they could tell. Rick drove the jeep a few hundred yards along the road, then got out and looked again. The heavy treads of his vehicle were clearly visible in the dust. If Connel had gone this way, he would have left similar marks.

"He took the trail," Rick said.

Scotty nodded. "Looks like it. Do we follow?"

"We sure do. What reason would he have for going to the station without dynamite?"

"None that I know of. Let's go."

Rick turned the jeep into the trail and sped along it as fast as the ruts allowed. As they reached their third station with no sign of Connel, Scotty spoke suddenly. "Suppose we find him? How do we explain why we're following him?"

Rick considered. He rejected a casual trip as explanation. Connel wouldn't buy it.

"We can park the jeep in the jungle," he said finally. "It will be well hidden. Then we can go on foot. If we see him coming, we can take to the bush. We'll be invisible a few feet away."

The jeep was driven into the area where their shots had been set off. It was invisible from the trail. The boys left it and started hiking.

It was hard going. The heat and humidity were both high, and they were sweating before a quarter mile was covered. The film of perspiration seemed to attract insects, too, and before long the pests were driving them to distraction. Rick brushed futilely at the shining swarm of gnats around his head. "I'm not sure it's worth it," he said grimly.

"Neither am I," Scotty agreed. "But we've started. Let's keep plugging."

They reached the first of Connel's shot stations without a sign of the geologist. It was much like their own, a small clearing with the ground torn by the dynamite.

The second station, a mile farther on, was similar except that there were more trees and fewer scrub palms. Rick identified one giant tree as mahogany.

They strode up the trail, grimly determined to find the geologist. One more station remained ahead. Rick doubted that he had gone farther than that. He wiped his streaming face and squinted his eyes to protect them from the whining gnats. They swarmed around but didn't seem to sting or bite. He was grateful for that much.

Suddenly Scotty let out a warning gasp. The dark-haired boy threw himself sideways, on top of Rick, and the two of them crashed to the ground.

"Roll away," Scotty said urgently. "Back! Hurry!"

The ground opened up a few feet away. Rick felt a giant hand pick him up, shake him, then slam him into a palmetto. Bruised and dazed, he grabbed the palmetto for support and lacerated his hands on the rough covering. He slid to the ground, consciousness slipping from him.

For a moment Rick lay slumped at the base of the palmetto. He didn't lose consciousness completely, but he was stunned and unable to function either mentally or physically. He had neither sight or hearing for the first few seconds, then these faculties

slowly returned. He became aware that he was looking down at a broad green leaf, and that the leaf was gradually turning crimson.

He watched, his vision clearing, and suddenly realized that the red pigment was dripping onto the leaf in a steady series of drops that was almost a stream. At almost the same instant he knew that the red was blood and that it was his. He shook his head to clear it, and the red spray flew from side to side. Through the periphery of vision he saw that it was coming from his nose.

Rick realized that he was on his hands and knees. He rose to a kneeling position and fished for his handkerchief. He put it to his nose and it came away stained red. He sighed with relief. Nosebleed. For a moment he had wondered. . . .

A few feet away Scotty was slowly stretching one limb after another, checking to be sure he was functioning. Satisfied, the ex-Marine sat up, with some effort. Rick saw that his nose was bleeding, too.

"You've got a nosebleed," Rick said faintly.

Scotty touched his nose with the back of his hand and examined the red trace. "Uhuh," he agreed.

"What happened?" Rick asked weakly. His voice sounded far away!

Scotty's answer was barely audible. "We found the missing dynamite. I saw a length of wire along the trail. Are you okay?"

"I think so." Rick got to his feet, feeling as though his body were in sections. "We must have been close when it went off."

The two held onto each other for mutual support while strength came back into them.

"We weren't too close," Scotty said finally. He gestured up the trail. Rick looked, and saw a gaping hole some distance away. Beyond it, coming toward them at as high a speed as the trail allowed, was Brad Connel in his jeep.

The geologist stopped as he reached the hole, then swung off the trail and plowed through some scrub and back onto it again. He drew up next to the boys.

"So it was you who stole the dynamite!" the geologist said grimly. "What happened? Did it explode while you were fooling around with it?"

The boys stared at him, dazed and openmouthed.

"You're crazy," Rick managed finally. "We didn't steal it, but we almost got blown up in it. If Scotty hadn't seen the wire, we both would have been blown to bits."

The geologist's eyes narrowed. "Do you mean to tell me someone tried to blow you up? That's nonsense!"

"That's what happened, nonsense or not," Rick said curtly.

Scotty added, "And what were you doing here?"

"Came to get my wallet," the geologist answered readily. "I missed it and figured I must have dropped it up here. It wasn't anywhere else I'd been. Better get in and let me take you back. If you were close enough to get nosebleeds you must be shaken up quite a bit."

"We're shaken," Rick agreed. "Our jeep is down at

our shot station. We decided to leave it there and take a hike."

They climbed into the back of Connel's jeep. The nosebleeds had stopped now, but their faces were smeared with blood. Neither felt like talking, nor, apparently, did Connel. He stopped at their third station and asked, "Can you make it? Or do you want to ride back with me?"

"We can make it," Rick said. "Thanks for the lift."

"I'd better stay behind you to make sure," Connel stated.

The boys headed straight back to the hotel, Connel a hundred yards to their rear. In the parking lot they thanked him again for the lift, then hurried in to let warm water wash away the traces of their experience.

Later, stretched out on their beds, they talked it over.

"You saved our bacon," Rick stated. "But what really happened?"

"I'm not sure," Scotty replied. "There are two possibilities. One, we sprung a booby trap. I don't really credit that one much, because we were rolling away when the stuff let go. If we'd hit a trip wire or something similar, the dynamite would have gone off right then. So, second possibility, someone was waiting for us. We jumped back just as he pushed the plunger. Or, maybe he saw we had spotted the trap and tried to get us, anyway."

"Who's he?" Rick asked.

"Persons unknown," Scotty answered. "Or maybe one person not unknown."

"Meaning Connel? He could have done it. Suppose he set the trap, then took his jeep up the hill out of sight. Then he could have walked back, fired the shot, hurried back for his jeep, and driven down."

"Could be," Scotty agreed. "Only, did he know we were coming?"

Rick shrugged. "How can we know that? For all we know, from his third shot station he might be able to look right down on the trail. He sees us, hurries into position, fires the charge, and hurries back. We can't really tell until we get to that third station. Personally, I vote for Connel."

"Not proven," Scotty warned.

Rick knew it. "It may never be proven, on account of no witnesses. But suppose it was some unknown party? Why wouldn't that party try for Connel? Why wait until he's passed, and we're coming into position? Would an unknown thief be that interested in us?"

"Too many questions," Scotty objected. "I haven't any answers. But you make a good case for its being Connel. Also, did you notice how he jumped on us for stealing the dynamite? That probably would have been his story if we'd been killed. Now tell me what his motive is. Why should he try to delay the project?"

Rick had no answer to that. "Makes no sense," he agreed. "Unless there's something he doesn't want us to see. That dynamite sure discouraged our trip to his third station!"

CHAPTER VII

Casa Guevara

THE scientific party lost only one day because of the dynamite theft. Governor Montoya supplied more explosives and the firing schedule continued. Now, however, the dynamite was guarded by police supplied by His Excellency. Police also were in evidence around the Hot Springs Hotel. No more chances were being taken.

After three days, the scientists began to have a better idea of what was going on in the earth beneath them, but Rick and Scotty could make little sense of the mass of data. Even the picture being filled in by Dr. Williams was confusing. Now, two magma areas were showing where only one had shown before.

Esteben Balgos answered Rick's plea for an explanation. Over an excellent dinner of roast suckling pig and bananas steamed with lemon juice, the volcanologist took time to answer their questions.

"There is much we do not know about volcanoes," the Peruvian scientist began. "For example, we do

not know exactly what causes magma to form. Magma is, in simplest terms, molten rock. Some event takes place far below, where the earth's crust ends and the mantle begins, and the rock melts."

"How far below?" Rick asked.

"The distance varies. Under the ocean trenches, for example, the mantle may begin only four miles down. Under some of the mountainous land masses it may be closer to forty miles."

Scotty whistled. "That's a whale of a distance. How can you tell how far down it is?"

"By the seismic traces from earthquakes, or from explosive shots like the ones we are shooting. When the shock waves have reached the zone between the earth's crust and the mantle, we see the results on our tracings."

"Is it really a sharp line?" Rick queried.

"Probably not. No one is sure yet. It may be a kind of transitional zone, from one kind of material to another, or it may be a distinct layer. We call it the Mohorovicic Discontinuity, after the Yugoslav scientist who discovered it by analysis of seismic tracings. At any rate, it is somewhat above this discontinuity that magma is formed. We don't know how."

"Then it rises?" Scotty asked.

"It forces its way up, by expansion. Sometimes the magma strikes water and there is an explosion—a steam explosion. But generally the magma rises through a fairly small channel. It forms a pool under the volcano. The pool is actually a reservoir of molten rock. Generally it is shaped like a lens. The magma

gathers. Eventually it forces its way to the surface, again through channels."

"What kind of channels?" Rick asked.

"It depends on the kind of volcano. Sometimes the channels are weaknesses in the whole surrounding earth structure, and the magma flows through cracks and emerges as sheets of lava. Sometimes there is a central channel through which the magma can rise."

"Which do we have?" Scotty wanted to know.

"Probably neither or perhaps both. There was once a central channel in El Viejo. It is closed now, and we do not know if it is weaker than the rest of the mountain. There is a weak fissure under the hot springs. So, El Viejo can vent either way."

Rick shook his head. He had learned enough of natural forces to know there are often no definite answers to questions, but this was critical.

"So the volcano could blow off on top or side, and we can't guess which?"

"That is correct. However, explosive action in a volcano usually comes when the magma meets enough water to create steam. Now, our closest magma front is still far below the floor of the surrounding ocean. You follow me? Good. When the magma rises to the level of the ocean floor, what do you think will happen?"

Rick could see the picture in his mind. He said slowly, "It will probably meet water. Plenty of it, from seepage of the ocean downward through cracks in the ocean floor. Maybe there are cracks like the one in the parking lot, caused by earthquakes."

"Precisely. And when the magma meets the water, then what?"

"The water turns to steam instantly." Scotty answered grimly. "The steam expands instantly—and boom!"

"Boom," Balgos agreed solemnly. "But how big a boom we do not know. It may blow the top off El Viejo. It may blow a gap along one of the cracks. We don't know."

Rick digested this information in silence. The picture was certainly not a cheerful one. "How far down are the magma fronts?" he asked.

"As closely as we can tell, the bottom one is right above the discontinuity, which is about six miles below us at this point. The upper one is about a mile below the top of El Viejo. This puts it about a quarter of a mile below the floor of the ocean."

"Too close," Scotty muttered. "What now?"

"We keep shooting, to try and keep track of the upper front. Also, we will place instruments called tiltometers on the mountain slope. These are devices that really measure tilt. You see, if the lens of magma is increasing, El Viejo will swell up slightly. The tiltometers will show it, and we will then have further proof of what is coming."

"But what can we do about it?" Rick demanded.

Balgos shrugged. "*Quién sabe?* The Spanish phrase is a good one, because it does not only ask 'who knows,' it also carries the meaning of a kind of resignation. There does not seem to be anything we can do."

Rick stared across the dining room, eyes unseeing. It was hard to imagine that molten rock was gathering below them in sufficient quantity to make a mountain move; but once you succeeded in imagining it, the picture was terrifying.

Motion attracted his glance and his eyes focused in time to see Brad Connel rise from the table and excuse himself. He watched the geologist walk out of the room and turned to Scotty. His pal nodded. He had seen Connel leave, too.

Rick quickly counted noses. All others were present. Connel was the first to leave. He wondered where the geologist was going, and his eyes narrowed.

Connel had been very anxious about his and Scotty's condition, once the hotel was reached. Rick was sure his anxiety was strictly phony. Both boys had been stiff and sore, but a medical examination showed nothing seriously wrong, thanks to Scotty's fast action. Hartson Brant had been reluctant to accept Rick's opinion that Connel had stolen the dynamite and booby-trapped them. He pointed out that the geologist had no motive; he had never even been on San Luz before.

Rick had to agree. There was no apparent motive, but that didn't mean Connel was innocent. He might have a motive that no one suspected.

Scotty cocked an eyebrow at Rick and made a slight motion of his head toward the door where Connel had vanished. Rick got the signal. He nodded.

The boys thanked Dr. Balgos for his explanation, then excused themselves. They wandered casually from the dining room.

Once outside, Rick grinned at Scotty. "So you're wondering where Connel has gone?"

"Aren't you?"

"Sure. But why not ask the others what he said when he excused himself?"

Scotty shook his head. "They didn't think much of our theory about Connel causing our troubles, did they? If we asked, they'd think we were pushing the same point too hard."

Rick agreed. "Where did he go?"

"I don't know. But if he leaves the hotel, it will be by jeep. There's nothing within walking distance. If we get out back of the pump shed we'll see him if he comes out."

"Aye, aye. And if he jeeps out of here, we'll be on his tail. Roger?"

"You said a Brantish mouthful. Let's go."

A quick reconnaissance disclosed no sign of the geologist outside, and the boys hurried across the dark parking lot to the shadow of the pump shed. A police officer materialized from the darkness and greeted them courteously. "Good evening, señores. *A sus órdenes.*"

By placing himself at their orders, the officer was politely asking their business, Rick knew. He replied, "We came out to see if anyone had made another try for the dynamite, Señor *Teniente.*" Calling the officer "lieutenant" was a form of flattery.

"*Sargento, muchas gracias,*" the officer replied. White teeth flashed in a grin. "But who can tell the future? If I capture the thief, it may soon be lieutenant instead of sergeant."

"We hope so," Scotty said politely.

Rick noted that the three were hidden from the parking lot by the pump house. The position was satisfactory. If Connel was going to take a jeep, he probably would do so right away. Otherwise, why should he be the first to leave the dining room?

"Why would anyone steal dynamite?" Rick asked the police officer. He wanted only to keep a quiet conversation going behind the pump house.

The officer had theories. Perhaps revolutionaries had stolen it. Also, although it was against the law and brought severe punishment, fishermen were known to dynamite fish. This also was a possibility. But the explosion of the dynamite on the mountainside was certainly a puzzle.

Rick didn't think so, but he agreed politely. It was bewildering, he said. Why steal explosives and then use it on a harmless scientific group?

Perhaps fear of discovery caused the thief to set a trap, the officer guessed. He admitted it wasn't a good guess.

A jeep roared into life and the boys stiffened. The officer strolled out of the shadow for a look. "One of your associates is going for a ride," he said.

Rick waited until the jeep lights cut across the parking lot and moved down the western road, then he said, "It's a nice night for a ride, Scotty. What say

we take a jeep and look over the country, too?"

"Good idea," Scotty agreed readily.

They bade the officer good night and started to where Zircon's jeep was parked. It was a temptation to hurry, but they suppressed it and sauntered to the jeep. Fortunately, no keys were needed. The jeep ignition was turned on by a simple switch. Rick got into the driver's seat and started up. He waited, the motor idling, until he was sure Connel was out of sight around the mountain, then he drove slowly across the parking lot and followed.

Fortunately, there was enough moonlight to see the road. Once out of sight of the hotel, Rick stopped and switched off the lights. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness he started off again as fast as vision allowed.

Once he sighted Connel's lights. They were ahead and higher on the mountain. He lost sight of them again as foliage blocked the view. "Suppose he's heading for the shot station?" he asked.

Scotty shrugged. "We'll soon know."

They reached the pumice works without seeing the geologist's lights again, and Rick stopped at the turnoff. "Now what?" he asked. "Did he go up the trail or not?"

Scotty sniffed the air. "Smell anything?"

Rick breathed deeply. There was the odor of rank vegetation, and, very faintly, the odor of sulfur from the hot springs. But there was another smell, too. After a moment he identified it. "Dust!"

"Seems so," Scotty agreed. "Which means he didn't

take the trail to the stations. No dust on those tracks. He must have taken the dirt road to San Souci."

"But why?" Rick was already moving ahead to where the pavement ended. "What's in San Souci?"

Scotty chuckled. "Ask Connel. Don't ask me."

"I thought Marines knew everything," Rick gibed.

"Almost everything," Scotty corrected.

The jeep moved onto the dirt road and in a moment their own cloud of dust obscured any slight haze that Connel's passing might have left. They were in strange territory now, and Rick slowed down somewhat. Connel had the advantage of lights. They wouldn't be able to gain on him.

"He can't get far," Scotty said reassuringly. "The road goes to San Souci and nowhere else. It can't be much of a town, so we'll find him."

Scotty was right. San Souci wasn't much of a town. There were a handful of fishermen's huts, a dock with a number of fishing boats, racks for drying fish, a single store, and nothing else. There was a paved road leading from the town to the main city of Calor, but Connel hadn't taken it. Nor was the jeep in San Souci.

Rick's halting Spanish was sufficient to communicate with a fisherman who spoke equally halting English. He had been taking the air all evening. No other vehicle had come to San Souci.

"Now what?" Rick asked helplessly.

"He went somewhere," Scotty responded. "And that somewhere has to be a turnoff between here and the pumice works. We must have missed it because

we traveled without lights. Let's go back and look."

"I'm with you," Rick agreed. "But wherever he turned off must be a trail, because there are no side roads on the map." He swung the jeep around and started back. He had turned on the headlights as they approached the fishing village; he kept them on.

They found the turnoff about a mile from San Souci. The road widened slightly, and there was an opening in the foliage just wide enough for a car. Twin gateposts of concrete marked the passage. Rick turned the jeep, and the headlights picked out a name cut in the concrete pillars: *Casa Guevara.*

"Someone's house," Rick said. "Name of Guevara. We can't very well go rolling up a private driveway, can we?"

"Especially with that sign," Scotty added. He pointed to a wooden sign set slightly to one side of the private road just beyond the gate. It read *No Entrar.* No Trespassing.

"Question," Rick said thoughtfully. "Did Connel go up this road or is there another one?"

"No evidence," Scotty replied.

Rick pointed to the gatepost. "Who do we know that's named Guevara?"

Scotty breathed, "Sure! The lieutenant governor!"

"And he took Connel to the hospital to see Ruiz," Rick reminded, "so they're acquainted."

He switched off the lights. "That's probably the answer. Connel was invited to pay a social call. Why not? This probably has nothing to do with the project at all."

Scotty sighed audibly. "The trouble with you is that you come up with sensible answers. We might as well go on back to the hotel."

"Might as well . . ." Rick began, then stopped as light appeared dimly through the foliage up the private driveway. They were headlights!

"We've got to get out of here," he said, and threw the jeep into gear. For a moment he hesitated. If he went up the dirt road to the hotel, Connel would surely see them. If Rick went back toward San Souci and the oncoming car was not Connel, but someone from Casa Guevara, the car might also turn toward San Souci, and the boys would be seen.

Rick thought quickly. About a hundred yards toward San Souci there was a break in the foliage that he had almost investigated until he saw that no tracks led into it. He quickly switched into four-wheel drive and swung the jeep in its own length. The lights were closer now. Rick accelerated and found the opening through the jungle scrub. The jeep bounced as he drove into it, then swung until they were behind a screen of palmetto. He killed the engine.

Scotty piled out, Rick close behind him. They hurried to the edge of the highway, careful to keep masked by the palmetto, and watched.

A jeep emerged from the driveway to Casa Guevara. In the back-scattered light from its headlights they saw that Connel was the driver. He was alone. They watched until his taillights flickered out beyond a bend in the road.

"Interesting," Rick said. "Does a social call last for

Connel was alone in the jeep

less than a half hour? Answer: no, not in San Luz. There's Spanish-style hospitality here, and Connel would have been there for hours."

"He came on business," Scotty said slowly. "But what kind of business would he have with the lieutenant governor?"

"That," Rick said grimly, "is what we need to find out."

CHAPTER VIII

The Governor Vanishes

FAR below the surface of San Luz, white-hot rock, flowing like incandescent molasses, forced its way upward under enormous pressure. Sometimes the magma remained quiet for hours, pulsing slightly like a living thing. Then it would melt its way through to a weakness in the earth's structure, creating a new channel for its upward flow.

In one new channel was basaltic rock with a higher moisture content than the magma had encountered before. As the moisture turned instantly to steam, it expanded with sudden violence, and the earth shook with the force of the explosion.

Far above the pocket, Rick Brant felt the earth tremble, and shook his head. The temblors were increasing in frequency, although none had been as violent as that first day's earthquake. The boy looked at Scotty. His pal's face was grim.

The scientists around the worktable had paused, too, as they felt the earth tremble.

Esteben Balgos said quietly, "El Viejo is getting ready. If we are going to act, it must be soon."

"Act?" Connel demanded. "How?"

Balgos shrugged. "That is what we are here to decide."

Rick watched the geologist's face. He was sure that Connel, for reasons unknown, was trying to slow down the project. He was satisfied that the man had stolen both the initial tracings and the dynamite. He also knew that Connel lied. On their return from trailing him to Casa Guevara, the boys had found Connel having a cup of coffee in the dining room and had asked casually where he had gone. He had muttered something about going into Calor for a supply of cigars.

Hartson Brant asked, "What do you make of this series of tracings? My own opinion is that we have found a structural weakness through which the magma will move. But the weakness does not extend far enough upward to give any idea of the channel the magma will take to the surface."

The scientist pointed to a series of blue lines as he spoke. Dr. Williams examined the lines, then took his pencil and began to sketch rapidly on his cross-section drawing of the volcano and the earth under it. Rick watched as the sketch took shape. From the upper lens-shaped magma front Williams was drawing a series of lines that changed direction, moving toward the western side of the island. Then, across the top of the upward-moving lines Williams drew a horizontal line.

"Those upward strokes are the fissures shown by the tracings," he said. "Notice that they stop at the horizontal line. My guess is that the horizontal line represents an unbroken stratum that will probably stop the magma temporarily. We may even have another one of those lens-shaped pools develop."

Big Hobart Zircon poked at the sketch with a huge finger. "Jeff, how far below the surface is this stratum?"

"Slightly over a quarter of a mile, I'd guess. It's hard to be accurate within a few feet. On that side of the mountain the ocean bottom is a few hundred feet below sea level, and I'd say the hard rock is probably a thousand feet below that."

Zircon rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "If we could somehow breach that hard rock and allow room for the magma to flow upward, what would happen?" he inquired.

Esteben Balgos exclaimed excitedly, "Once through the layer of hard rock, the magma would encounter plenty of surface water. Look at Jeff's sketch. Above the hard rock there are many fissures, which must have a high water content. If the magma reaches those, we will have violent eruption through the western side of the mountain, probably right about sea level."

Rick could see instantly what Balgos meant. "Dad, an eruption on the west side would be perfect! The mountain itself would protect Calor and the rest of the island!"

"That's true, Rick," Hartson Brant agreed. "The

problem is, how can we possibly create a break in a layer of hard rock so far underground?"

David Riddle answered him. "There's one way. Drive a tunnel down through it."

All eyes looked at him.

"Can it be done?" Julius Weiss demanded.

"Yes. If there's enough time, enough machinery, and enough manpower. But look at the problem. Once the magma starts to move upward through those faults Jeff has drawn, it will move fast. The tunnel would have to be done before the magma started to move. Otherwise, the heat would be too great for men to work, and even if they could work they'd be drilling right into magma."

"This stuff is beyond me," Connel said. "Let me know what you decide, will you?" He turned and walked from the room.

Rick's eyes met Scotty's. The ex-Marine nodded, and in a moment quietly slipped out of the room.

Julius Weiss demanded, "Are you seriously proposing that we drive a tunnel for over a quarter mile, almost straight down, through solid rock?"

Riddle shrugged. "Do you know any other way of releasing the magma safely? I don't."

"Perhaps it could be done," Hartson Brant said thoughtfully. "But, as Dave says, we'd need time, machinery, and manpower. I'm sure we can get the machinery and the manpower from the governor. But do we have time?"

Balgos and Williams looked at each other. They were the experts. It was up to them to say.

"How long, Jeff?" Balgos asked.

"I don't know. If we assume the magma will continue rising at roughly the same rate we've measured during the past few days, I'd guess perhaps two or three weeks. On the other hand, the magma could find weaknesses we haven't detected. We may have only a few days."

"We'll have to try," Hartson Brant stated. "If the governor can give us the entire labor force of the island, and all available earth-moving machinery, we have a chance at least. If we do nothing, there's no chance at all. I think we should pay a visit to the governor right now."

Scotty came back into the room. "Connel's in his room," he reported. "I think he made a telephone call, but I can't be sure without checking with the switchboard. Shall I?"

"It doesn't matter," Rick told him. "We're on our way to see the governor. Connel can't stop things now."

The scientists were already moving through the door and to the jeeps. Within a few moments the small convoy was moving down the mountainside toward Calor and the executive offices.

Inside the cool, white stone building the group waited while Esteben Balgos went to see if the governor was available. He came out of the executive suite with a look of concern on his face.

"The governor is not in," he reported. "His secretary does not know where he is. The secretary's worried. Montoya didn't show up at all this morning and

his residence says he left at the usual time. I think we'd better see the lieutenant governor."

Rick started to speak, but thought better of it. Connel had not come with them, and his visit to Guevara could mean nothing.

Jaime Guevara was a tall, thin man with a hawk face and a tiny goatee. Hartson Brant, as spokesman, got to the point right away. He described the reason for their coming, and their findings to date. He stressed the need for fast action. In the governor's absence, he stated, they would need the active support of Señor Guevara. If he would issue orders at once, the scientific group would be happy to organize and supervise the work.

Guevara listened until the scientists had finished, then he smiled. "A strange tale," he said. "It is difficult to believe El Viejo is getting ready to erupt. Surely your imaginations have run away with you."

"We do not depend on imagination," Balgos said curtly. "We depend on scientific investigation. The situation is precisely as Dr. Brant outlined it."

"No doubt," Guevara said soothingly. "But surely you realize I cannot disrupt the economy of the entire island simply to dig a hole. Why, the people would laugh their heads off. No, señores, I am helpless. You had better see the governor."

"The governor isn't here and there is no time to lose," Hartson Brant said flatly. "You must act immediately if the island is to be saved. The lives of your people are in your own hands."

"Perhaps the governor will return soon," Guevara

said. "He will doubtless believe your story and take action. I regret that I cannot. And now, if you will excuse me?"

"Then you will not move even to save the island?"

"I do not believe the island is in danger, Dr. Brant," Guevara said coldly. "Convince the governor —if you can find him. Meanwhile, have the favor to cease bothering me with your silly tales!"

CHAPTER IX

The Yellow Ground

GOVERNOR LUIS MONTOYA could not be located. Neither his family nor his staff knew his whereabouts. There was great alarm over his unexplained absence. The police were searching for the missing executive, but with no success.

Hartson Brant called a council of war and told the scientific group that his most recent phone call to Guevara had even resulted in a turndown when he asked for more dynamite. The lieutenant governor evidently was not content with refusing to help, he was going to obstruct.

"There is dynamite on Trinidad," Hartson Brant said. "Plenty of it. I made a phone call to a friend at the U. S. Air Base there, and he agreed to get it for us. Rick, you and Scotty fly over to Port of Spain right away. The information is written down here." He handed Rick a slip of paper.

"If you leave now, you can get there before dark, spend the night and come back in the morning.

Bring all the dynamite you can carry, with caps and a few reels of primer cord. We'll need more wire, too. Get hopping, now."

"Yes, sir," Rick said. He and Scotty ran to their room for toothbrushes, stuffed their pockets with extra socks and underwear, and ran to the parking lot for the jeep.

The weather was fine and clear, and the flight uneventful. When they landed at the U. S. base they found that Hartson Brant's friend, Colonel Tom Markey, had arranged for a full load of dynamite, and full gas tanks for the plane. The boys spent the night at bachelor officers' quarters at the base and took off at dawn, the Sky Wagon sluggish from its load of dynamite cases.

Back at the Hot Springs Hotel, they unloaded the dynamite from the jeep and stored it under police protection in the pump house. Then they went to look for the scientists.

Hartson Brant, David Riddle, and Julius Weiss were in the conference room working over drawings. Rick saw that they were sketches of a tunnel.

The scientists welcomed them, and Rick asked, "Any progress, Dad?"

"No, Rick. The governor is still missing. We can't get help until he's found."

"Where are the others?" Scotty asked.

"Placing tiltometers on the mountain," his father told him. "The instruments were ordered by phone from Caracas right after you left and got in on the first morning plane."

Rick glanced at Scotty. He asked, "Exactly where are the others?"

"Balgos and Connel are at the north end of the mountain, above Redondo. Williams and Zircon are up above us somewhere. They started the climb behind the hot springs."

"I think we'll get a bite to eat," Rick said. "Unless you need us."

"No. There's nothing for you to do right at the moment, but Balgos wants you to take some photos from the air later this afternoon."

"Okay, Dad." Rick gestured, and Scotty followed him out.

"All's quiet," Rick told his pal. "And a quiet time is a good time to do a little investigating. Let's go to the kitchen, get a couple of sandwiches, and eat them on the way."

"To where?" Scotty asked. He grinned. "Don't tell me. To see what Connel is hiding over at his stations."

"On the button. Let's get going."

There was nothing whatever of interest at Connel's first two stations. The ground was torn up somewhat from the series of shots, but the boys could find no trace of anything unusual. They got back into the jeep, and Rick drove up the trail to the last station. He followed the path of broken vegetation Connel's jeep had made, noticing that the trail was dipping downward to a spot lower on the mountain than the other stations.

They reached a patch of crushed and yellowed growth where Connel obviously had parked his jeep.

There were oil stains on some of the broken leaves.

Scotty pointed to a brown-paper cigarette stub. "Ever see Connel smoke one of those?"

Rick hadn't. "He smokes cigars. Where do you suppose that came from?"

Scotty got out of the jeep and bent over the butt. "The tip is still damp," he said. "Someone's been here very recently. We'd better keep an eye open."

Trampled vegetation showed them the path to the firing place. Moving cautiously, the boys walked down the path, eyes constantly searching for signs of movement in the heavy growth.

The clearing where Connel had placed his shots was only a short distance down the path. Rick examined it carefully, but it looked like all the others, except for one thing. The broken earth was yellow, and of a different texture than the deep jungle loam at the other stations.

Rick walked into the shattered area and picked up a piece of the yellow ground. It broke in his hands. "Funny-looking stuff," he said.

"Yes," Scotty agreed. "Take a look around while I keep a watch. I have a funny feeling we're not alone here."

There was a fairly deep crater in the middle of the area. Rick stepped into it and kicked yellow earth out of his way. He was puzzled. There was nothing visible in the area except the yellow ground, and there was nothing about that to give him a clue to Connel's determination to keep them away.

His foot dislodged a clump of earth. It rolled to the

bottom of the shot crater, exposing two large crystals. Rick picked them up and rubbed the dirt off. They felt rather greasy. He didn't think they were quartz. His mind ranged over the possibilities. Probably datolite, he decided. The color was about right, and he knew datolite was found in igneous rocks of volcanic origin. He put the crystals in his pocket.

A trace of blue caught his eye and he knelt, digging with his hands. He uncovered a few more of the datolite crystals and put them in his pocket. They weren't particularly good specimens; he had some in his rock collection that were perfectly formed and clear, but at least they were something to take home.

Digging uncovered a layer of hard blue rock, heavily pockmarked and filled with the yellow ground. He saw one place where the blue actually blended in with yellow and decided that the blue and yellow were probably the same rock. The slaty blue simply turned to yellow when it was exposed to the air for a while.

There were loose pieces of blue, broken by the dynamite blasts. He picked up a couple of smaller pieces, then added a piece of yellow to his collection. He uncovered another crystal, too, a large one nearly the size of a golf ball and put that in his pocket.

Scotty was getting restless. "Let's get going," he said. "I don't like this."

Rick had seen enough, and it had told him nothing. He was just as puzzled over Connel's motive as ever. Obviously, the answer was not here—or, if it was, they couldn't see it.

"Okay," he said. "Move out."

Scotty led the way back to the jeep. Rick got into the driver's seat and started the motor. He backed and turned in the narrow space Connel's jeep had created, and finally got his wheels straight for the run back.

From somewhere behind them a voice called, *"Parada!"*

"Who's that yelling at us to stop?" Rick asked.

"I can't see anyone," Scotty replied. His eyes were scanning the jungle. "But I don't know anyone around here we want to talk to. I've got a hunch we should get going."

Rick felt the same. He released the clutch and the jeep moved ahead.

"Parada!" the voice yelled again, and on the echo came the clear crash of a rifleshot. A jagged star suddenly appeared on the windshield between them!

Rick reacted instinctively. He shoved the gas pedal to the floor and bent low, the skin of his back crawling with the expectation of a rifle bullet hitting it. The jeep leaped ahead and he steered as best he could. He shifted into second and the vehicle picked up speed. The rifle snapped again and he heard the sound of the slug hitting metal in the rear of the jeep. Then the trail turned and there was heavy jungle growth between them and the unseen sniper.

Not until they reached the second station, a mile away, did Rick slow down. He looked at Scotty, his face grim. "The place was guarded. What else can you make out of it?"

"Just that," Scotty agreed. "The guard must have been making a tour around the shot station. He got back just as we were taking off."

"Funny he didn't hear the jeep when we came," Rick said.

"Not very. Sound gets lost pretty fast in this heavy growth. You couldn't hear us a hundred yards away. Probably there's just the one guard, and he goes around the station in a big circle."

"I'll buy it," Rick agreed. "But why? Why guard a chunk of jungle with nothing in it but some torn up yellow ground?"

"When I find out," Scotty replied, "I'll let you know first thing."

CHAPTER X

The Volcanic Pipe

HARTSON BRANT and Julius Weiss were still at work in the conference room when Rick and Scotty returned. David Riddle had gone, and the others had evidently not finished placing the tiltometers.

The two listened to Rick's story in silence, then Hartson Brant sighed. "I don't know how you do it, Rick. But if there's trouble around, you and Scotty will find it. Are you sure the rifleman shot at you?"

"We've got a bullet hole in the windshield and one just under the rear seat," Scotty said. "One might be an accident, but not two."

"I agree." Hartson Brant nodded. "Let's see the samples of earth you brought back, Rick."

He took both the yellow and blue pieces from his pocket and put them on the table. Hartson Brant and Weiss examined them with interest.

"Unusual," Weiss said. "I think you are right in assuming that the yellow is simply an oxidized form of the blue, Rick. But I can't tell you what the material is. I've never seen anything like it before."

"The grain is pretty fine," Hartson Brant added. "It could be igneous or sedimentary in origin. I'm not enough of a rock hound to know. David Riddle can tell us when he returns."

"Connel would know, too," Scotty reminded. "He's a geologist. Wouldn't you think he would have mentioned an unusual formation like this when he found it?"

"Perhaps it's not unusual to a geologist," Weiss pointed out.

"Where is Riddle?" Rick asked.

"He went to his room a few minutes ago. He should be back shortly. Rick, I think you'd better tell us the whole story. Why do you suspect Connel? Why was it important for you to look at his shot station?"

Rick started at the beginning. "It wasn't any one thing, it was a series of little offbeat things. We thought it was funny he didn't even want company after Ruiz was hurt. Then he reacted so violently when we proposed swapping stations. It just seemed odd. The theft of the tracings bothered us, too. No ordinary thief would steal papers and leave Dr. Williams' wallet in his pocket, or leave his pocket transistor radio and stuff like that."

"But you can't connect Connel with the theft of the papers," Weiss objected.

"No, sir, we can't. But we almost got caught in the stolen dynamite, and he could have set that off. It was while we were on the way to his third station."

Scotty added, "Today, when we got to the station, I took a look along the trail. There's only one bend

in it. If he was keeping a watch at the bend, he could have seen us arrive at the second station, hurried down the trail, set off the charge, then returned through the jungle to get his jeep."

"But the fact that he could have, does not mean that he did," Hartson Brant stated.

"We can't prove it," Scotty agreed.

Rick continued. "Then we trailed him to Casa Guevara. He couldn't have been paying a social call, because he wasn't there long enough. And what business does he have with Guevara? I don't know, but I'll bet his business is the reason we can't get Guevara to move."

"Possibly," Hartson Brant agreed. "I can see the reason for your suspicions, but you lack proof of anything, Rick. What motive could Connel have?"

"We hoped to find out at the shot station," Rick replied. "But we drew a blank."

Dr. David Riddle came into the room and joined them. Before anyone could speak, the geologist spotted the samples on the table and sucked in his breath sharply.

"Where did these come from?" he demanded.

"Connel's third shot station," Rick replied. "Do you know what the stuff is?"

Riddle sank into a chair and picked up one of the samples, testing it between his fingers. "Yes," he said, "I do. I've seen it only once before, in Africa. It occurs in what is known as a volcanic pipe, actually an ancient channel that gets filled with the stuff for reasons we do not know."

"A volcanic pipe," Hartson Brant said softly. "I'm beginning to see."

Rick wasn't. "But what is it?" he asked.

"The most valuable kind of ground in the world," Riddle said. "So far as anyone knew up to now, such pipes have occurred only in Africa. The one I saw was at Kimberley. The name came from there. This is kimberlite."

Rick knew of only one kind of valuable that was associated with Kimberley, and the thought was so staggering that he was almost afraid to say it out loud. "You mean that this is the stuff diamonds are found in?"

"Exactly," Riddle said.

Rick fished the handful of crystals from his pocket and stared at them unbelievingly. "Then these," he said hoarsely, "must be diamonds!"

CHAPTER XI

Earthquake!

"EVERYTHING adds up," Rick Brant said grimly. "And it isn't a pretty picture."

Hartson Brant agreed. "It certainly seems to add up, Rick. I suggest you put those crystals in a safe place until we can find out for certain whether or not there is real value there."

"Is there any doubt?" Scotty asked.

David Riddle answered, "Yes, Scotty. There are many grades of diamonds. Until an expert takes a look at those Rick collected, we won't be sure that they're of gem quality. He may have industrial grade diamonds, of the type called bort."

"Connel may already have had an expert take a look," Weiss pointed out.

Rick examined the handful of crystals. It was hard to believe he had simply picked up diamonds like so many pebbles. What's more, he couldn't be sure whether he held a king's ransom in his hand or a few dollars' worth of industrial abrasives.

"Why didn't Connel clean out all diamonds in the area?" he demanded.

"How could he?" Hartson Brant retorted. "When has he had time for a real effort? I suspect he has picked up quite a few, but you found those just by kicking around, which would indicate he hasn't sifted that loose ground very thoroughly."

David Riddle frowned. "It's odd that Rick found so many. Perhaps he was lucky enough to kick open a pocket that Connel missed. Diamonds just don't occur with such frequency, even in Kimberley."

"They were pretty close together," Rick remembered. "It may have been a pocket, all right."

"There is one other possibility," Riddle added, "and it's staggering to think of it. These crystals may have come from a single large crystal. Perhaps the dynamite explosions shattered the big one into a number of smaller ones."

Scotty gulped. "But the original crystal would have had to be nearly the size of a grapefruit!"

"True, Scotty. There have been crystals that big, or close to it. Usually the diamond that is cut from such a crystal is much smaller. There is considerable loss. But it's a possibility."

Rick said abruptly, "I think we ought to sort of review the situation. To see where we stand."

"A good idea," his father agreed. "Suppose you start?"

Rick considered. "Well, Connel must have discovered the yellow ground the very first thing, probably while he was kicking a hole to lay the charge in. The

reason I think so is because of Ruiz. That accident has always bothered me. Ruiz just wouldn't walk back to the charge while Connel was ready to set it off. He just wouldn't."

Julius Weiss asked, "Are you implying that Connel deliberately blew Ruiz up?"

"What else can we make of it?" Rick replied. "That kind of accident just doesn't happen. Not to an expert. But if Connel found the yellow ground while setting the charge, and took time to dig a little and be sure there was blue ground under it, he would certainly have known that he was standing on top of a volcanic pipe. He might even have picked up a crystal."

"If word got out, he couldn't exploit the pipe," Scotty added. "So, Ruiz had to be eliminated. It would have been pretty easy. Connel had the watch. He could have kept track of the time, then asked Ruiz to make a final check and set the charge off while the poor guy was taking a look at the connections."

"It could have happened that way," Hartson Brant agreed. "But I hate to think any human being could be so ruthless."

"Connel had to keep others away, too," Rick went on. "Also, he had to slow things down so he could have time to set something up to exploit his find. So, he stole the tracings and the dynamite. That bought him a little time, didn't it? Then he tried to get Scotty and me, because we were following him and he was afraid we might find out what was going on."

"It seems reasonable," Hartson Brant agreed.

"Connel couldn't develop a diamond field in a foreign place without help, could he? He had to let someone in on it, locally. He sized up Guevara and figured the lieutenant governor could certainly help him out, so he brought Guevara in on it."

"Pure speculation," Weiss said.

"Yes, sir. But it fits. Guevara certainly wouldn't want people running around over there, so it's to his advantage to keep us from operating. If he thinks there's a fortune in the pipe, it's even to his advantage to kidnap the governor to make sure we can't follow our plans!"

David Riddle shook his head. "A man would have to be insane to hold up an effort to save the island just to make himself rich."

"He would if he believed the island was in danger," Scotty agreed. "But suppose he doesn't? I don't think Connel has the true picture. His time estimate was much longer than yours, and he hasn't been in on many of the discussions."

The three scientists looked at each other. "You know," Riddle said, "Scotty is right. Connel has shown little interest in the magma flux. He may not have a true understanding of the situation at all!"

"It's possible." Hartson Brant nodded. "Quite possible. After all, we borrowed him only to have another experienced man to handle the shots. His training certainly doesn't qualify him to understand the physics involved. He has concentrated on locating oil deposits, using standard data. This kind of thing is new to him."

"We didn't get him to handle data analysis," Weiss remarked. "There are enough of us who can do that."

Rick picked up his argument again. "If Connel doesn't believe there are only a couple of weeks, he would give the lieutenant governor his views, and he'd be believed, just because Guevara is so greedy he would believe anything that will make him rich. Of course I don't know for sure that Guevara is like that, but he certainly brushed us off, didn't he? And he didn't seem surprised when you told him about the danger."

"The thing that bothers me," Scotty stated, "is why Connel and Guevara haven't started to mine the diamonds."

"It takes organization," Rick pointed out. "Also, it couldn't be done while the governor was around, could it? He'd be sure to get wind of it. Connel and Guevara have to keep this quiet, or there will be a rush that will make the Klondike look like a picnic."

Scotty nodded. "That must be why they put a guard up there, too. Probably just one trusted man, who has to make the rounds alone. We were lucky he was on his rounds when we got there, or we'd never have had a chance for a close look."

"Well," Julius Weiss demanded, "what do we do now?"

A sudden earth tremor made the group pause. It lasted only a few seconds.

"Whatever we do, we'd better do it fast," Hartson Brant stated.

"Find the governor," Rick said. "That's the first

thing. We can't move unless we have official backing, and we certainly won't get it from Guevara!"

Esteben Balgos walked in, closely followed by Brad Connel. "We placed the instruments without difficulty," Balgos began—and Connel's eye caught sight of the kimberlite samples on the table. The geologist realized instantly that his secret was known, and he knew, too, the conclusions that would be drawn. Among other things, he was guilty of the attempted murder of Ruiz.

Connel bolted for the door.

The geologist was fast, but Scotty was faster. The dark-haired boy charged across the room, then dove headlong. His extended arms caught the fleeting geologist around the thighs, then Scotty's shoulder smashed into him. Connel went down like a tackled ball carrier. Before he could recover, Scotty had shifted his grip and the geologist was helpless in a punishing hold.

The scientists and Rick arrived a split second later.

"Let him up," Riddle ordered. "But keep a grip on him."

Scotty did so, and the geologist glared at the group with angry eyes. He didn't try to bluff; he knew it was useless.

Rick hurried to find the hotel manager, who directed them to a tool closet on the outside of the hotel near the parking lot. It had no windows, a single, small ventilating duct, and only one door. Connel was pushed inside, and the door locked. Hartson Brant pocketed the key.

"He'll have to stay there until we find the governor and arrange for trustworthy policemen," the scientist said. "I'm certain those who have been guarding the dynamite are all right, but we'd better have the governor's word for it."

Rick agreed with the precaution.

While Esteben Balgos was being briefed on the day's happenings, Zircon and Williams arrived and had to be briefed, too. Twice, small earth temblors interrupted the conference.

"Something is happening below us," Balgos said. "I wish we knew exactly what!"

The magma was pushing up relentlessly, melting its way into the channels Williams had marked on his sketch. In one of the channels was a large pocket in which water had collected over the centuries. Perhaps there was enough water to fill a substantial pond, perhaps even a small lake. There was also room in the porous rock for expansion, because the pocket was not entirely full. The magma neared the pocket, meeting small quantities of water on its way. Each meeting resulted in a small explosion, and a temblor that was felt far above.

Then—the magma's heat turned the pocket itself to steam. The steam expanded in a mighty explosion that sent great shock waves smashing through the earth.

Rick Brant's chair went over backward and he fell to a floor that was shaking like soft mud under him. He heard the crashing of glassware and the sounds of furniture falling. And he heard the ominous rum-

ble of the building itself, splitting, cracking, falling.

"Out!" Hartson Brant yelled. "Get outside!"

Rick scrambled to hands and knees and saw that Scotty was bending to pick him up. He waved his pal away and got to his feet, fighting to keep his balance on the shaking floor. He was scared stiff, but far from paralyzed. Nor did he lose his head. He made sure the scientists were on their way before he followed them through the nearest door.

"Back!" Scotty yelled.

The group paused as a section of building cornice crashed to the ground just outside. Dust billowed. Scotty sprang through the opening and looked up.

"Okay," he called. "Come on!"

The Spindrifters poured through the doorway out onto the parking lot. They were in time to see another section of cornice break loose and fall to the ground. Hotel employees were pouring out, too, gathering in the parking lot beyond the reach of the crumbling hotel.

Rick saw a great gap appear in one wall and waited breathlessly for the wall to fall, but it held. The ground still shook under his feet, and his insides were producing the queasy symptoms of motion sickness. Then the earth steadied again, leaving only a mild temblor that soon vanished.

The group looked at each other, white-faced. The earthquake had been by far the worst yet. There was even some doubt that the hotel was still safe. Rick, seeing the manager busy counting noses to make sure all his employees were out, gasped, "Connel!"

Hartson Brant ran for the tool closet, the others behind him. The scientist reached for the key, ready to let Connel out.

The wall was tilted crazily. The door had sprung wide open.

Connel was gone!

CHAPTER XII

The Rising Magma

THE Spindrift group held a council of war in their office-conference room. Inspection of the hotel had shown that damage was not as serious as first expected. The cornices, held only by mortar, had fallen, and the rear exterior wall had lost its brick veneer. The structural part of the wall, while cracked, was strong enough to hold up. The veneer was unsafe, however, and it was agreed that all should stay well away from the area where Connel had been imprisoned.

"We must begin another series of shots at once," Hartson Brant said. "It's apparent that the magma has moved, and rapidly. But until we get more tracings, we won't know in what direction. Meanwhile, we *must* find the governor!"

"How?" Rick asked. "How can we find him?"

Hartson Brant smiled at his son. "It seems to me that you and Scotty have acquired considerable reputations as detectives, Rick. I suggest you earn

them. Find the governor for us. We will give you Honorario as an interpreter, but it will be up to you. The rest of us must operate as best we can shorthanded."

"How about Connel?" Scotty demanded.

The scientist shrugged. "He's the least of my worries. Let him develop his diamond mine. My concern is with this island and the people on it. If our guess is right, Connel will be lucky to have a few days in which to work—scarcely enough to do much mining."

"Any ideas?" Rick asked.

"Yes. Talk to the governor's family, and to his personal staff. Stay away from Guevara. Once Connel tells him we know about the diamonds, he may become dangerous. Do what you can, boys. After all, this isn't a big island and the governor must be somewhere on it."

"If he's alive," Scotty added.

Hartson Brant looked at the boy and his face grew grim. "Yes," he agreed. "If he's alive."

Rick and Scotty had always relished the adventure and excitement of trying to solve a mystery. Sometimes the success or failure of a project had hung in the balance, but this one was different. The fate of an island and nearly 32,000 people depended on solving the riddle of the missing governor. Rick felt the weight of the responsibility.

The plan he and Scotty developed was simple and logical. They would start with the governor's movements on the morning of his disappearance and continue from there.

At the governor's residence they learned from his butler that Montoya had left the house promptly at eight o'clock, as he did every morning. He drove himself, in a small English car that he used for personal transportation. But, as they knew from the visit to the executive offices, he had never arrived.

The next stop was to determine his route. It wasn't difficult; there was only one main road from the outskirts of Calor into town, although there were many side streets.

With Honorario as interpreter, they began the time-consuming job of questioning householders along the route.

Honorario was personally interested in the job. He had learned from them of Connel's perfidy, and he said quietly, "Ruiz is my friend. We do not yet know if he will live, or, if he lives, if he will be a whole man again. I owe it to him to do my best in this matter. You may depend on me."

Not until they had reached the outskirts of Calor did they find what had happened. Through Honorario, an old lady who had seen it all through her window told them the story.

"A big military truck was across the road," Honorario reported. "It was keeping cars from passing. The little car of the governor came, and it had to stop. An officer got in with the governor. The truck moved away and the governor drove off. The old woman thinks the officer was pointing a gun at the governor. She did not know it was the governor, but her words to describe him were enough."

Rick whistled. "Military? Does that mean the governor got caught by some kind of revolutionary group?"

Honorario shrugged. "Who knows? But I have heard of no revolution. The governor is popular, and the people are satisfied. But you should know, my friends, that on this island the *comandante* of our small military is the lieutenant governor. I think we are not dealing here with revolution, but with Señor Jaime Guevara!"

"We're stuck," Scotty said. "I suppose we could keep on asking and try to get a line on where the governor's car went, but that's pretty hopeless. Honorario, can we possibly find someone who is loyal to the governor and who knows the island?"

Honorario thought it over. "In such a case," he replied, "there is only one way to be sure. It is, you understand, a matter of family. Among San Luzians, the family is first and all else is after. So, I think we should see the nephew of the governor. He is *el capitán* Ricardo Montoya, who is deputy of police for the western part of the island."

Captain Ricardo Montoya was young, capable, and alert. Honorario found him in the police headquarters in central Calor and invited him to join the boys for coffee at a nearby café.

Rick looked the officer over as he entered the restaurant, and he liked what he saw. Montoya was built like a middleweight fighter, and his white uniform was spotless. He was lighter in complexion than most San Luzians, but even the wisp of mustache on

his upper lip couldn't conceal the firmness of his face.

He greeted them courteously, in good English. "*A sus órdenes, señores.* This Honorario says you wish to speak with me?"

"We place ourselves in your hands, Señor *Capitán,*" Rick said quietly. "Because you are the governor's nephew and a police official, we must assume that you are completely loyal to him."

The officer's brilliant dark eyes flashed. "It would be a grave insult to assume otherwise, señor. He is the brother of my father."

"Good," Rick said. "No insult was intended. I think we had better tell you the entire story, then we can discuss what must be done." He started at the beginning, with the arrival of Balgos at Spindrift, and ended with the day's events.

"You have cast much light on what has happened," the captain stated. "I am grateful. Now, señores, you must not believe I have been idle. I had already discovered how my uncle was kidnaped. It was clear that some military element was involved, but I rejected the idea of revolution. The motive puzzled me. It is puzzling no longer, thanks to you. Also, while I suspected Guevara, there was no proof. My suspicion, you understand, was based on his character."

"Have you any idea where the governor was taken?" Scotty asked.

"I have now," Montoya said grimly. "The best possibility—and about the only place we have not looked—is Casa Guevara."

The boys exchanged glances. "Then we ought to

make up a party of loyal people and invade the place," Rick stated.

"No. If I know this man Guevara, any such move would mean the death of my uncle, if he still lives. We must find some other way."

"Can you find loyal people?" Rick asked.

"A few. You must understand most people do not feel as I do about Guevara. He is popular. Who knows where the loyalty of the people lies, between individuals? One cannot be certain. So, I must use only men loyal to me. There are such."

Montoya rose. "We will be allies, since we fight for the same thing, which is San Luz. Let me see what kind of plan can be made. Go back to your hotel, and I will come for you there. We will work this thing out together." He shook hands with both boys, turned, and strode from the restaurant.

Rick paid for their coffee and the boys joined Honorario, who was waiting outside in the jeep. "He's a good, tough *hombre*," Rick told the San Luzian. "You made a good choice."

"I am glad," Honorario said. "Someday he will be governor, like his uncle."

While the boys were in Calor, the scientists had conducted another series of shots. The tracings were spread out on the table when they returned, and the group was engrossed in checking them over.

Rick and Scotty waited, watching. They knew from the quiet voices and tense attitudes that something serious had been found. Then Williams began to mark in the data on his sketch.

"This is where the explosion took place," he said. "Probably the magma hit a quantity of water as it entered the new channel. Notice that the channel is one we marked on here earlier as a probable path. So far, we're guessing right. Now, my estimate is that the magma will move fast, stopping only when it reaches this dike of solid basalt."

Hartson Brant wiped his face with his handkerchief. "It looks bad, Jeff. The magma will reach the solid layer before we could possibly get to it with a tunnel."

"What does that mean?" Rick asked.

Hobart Zircon answered him. "It means, Rick, that we no longer have time to dig a vent. It means the people of this island will be lucky if they can get away in time!"

CHAPTER XIII

Armed Revolt

DAVID RIDDLE had fired the last series of shots from Connel's stations. By unanimous consent, the last station at the volcanic pipe had been omitted. Two stations would have to do for now. All agreed it would be foolish to jeopardize a man by going near the guarded third station.

Since Riddle had the longest distance to travel, he had not arrived when the boys returned to the hotel. Now, as Zircon finished his ominous statement, the government geologist strode into the room.

"We're in trouble," he stated. "I'm only a few minutes ahead of soldiers. I came out of the trail onto the road and saw them just coming off the dirt road onto the pavement. They shouted for me to stop, but I wasn't of a mind to tangle with troops. I came as fast as I could."

"Are they coming here?" Hartson Brant asked quickly.

"They're either coming here or marching into Calor. Those are the only two places the road leads. My guess is that they're marching here."

Rick said swiftly, "Connel got to Guevara! And Guevara is going to make sure we don't spread the word!"

"Rick is probably right," Zircon snapped. "I suggest we clear out. If we're captured, we'll be unable to operate at all."

"Grab the supplies and get into the jeeps," Hartson Brant ordered. "Quickly! Rick, you and Scotty move fast. Get your stuff into the jeep, then take as much dynamite as you can. Go up the road to where you have a good view and act as lookouts. Give us as much warning as you can. We'll take the rest of the dynamite and the equipment in the other jeeps!"

Rick and Scotty dashed to their room. They threw clothes into their bags, slammed them shut without bothering to pack neatly, and hurried out into the parking lot. Rick backed the jeep up to the pump shed while Scotty ran to the door. To the policeman on duty he explained only that they were in a great hurry.

The boys took time to load six cases, plus one of the detonators and a roll of wire, then they got into the jeep and roared off up the road toward the pumice works.

"We've probably got ten minutes," Scotty estimated. "If they're marching at a normal pace, it would take them a little less than a half hour to walk from the pumice works."

Rick drove a half mile up the road to where he had a good view of several hundred yards and stopped the jeep. "We'll be able to spot them from here." He turned the jeep around, ready to run as soon as the troops came in sight. "Where do you suppose the soldiers came from?"

"Probably from a camp near San Souci," Scotty guessed. "Otherwise, they'd have come up the main road from Calor. There's probably a camp on the western shore somewhere."

"Wish we had some way of slowing them down," Rick mused. "We need a mortar or a few military rockets. But all we've got is some dynamite, and we can't throw that very far."

"Why do we have to throw it?" Scotty asked excitedly. "Listen. We'll put a charge by the side of the road and string wire back a way. Then we can park the jeep off the road next to the detonator. When they get within range, we'll push the plunger and run. We can time it so they won't get blown up, but they may think they're being shelled."

"That should do it," Rick agreed. He shifted into gear and moved ahead slowly, searching for a likely spot. There was one a few yards ahead where a clump of wild banana plants would shield the jeep from view. He backed the jeep in next to the banana plants and made sure he could get out again easily, then he took the coil of wire and began unwinding it along the edge of the road. Scotty took out his scout knife and began to pry open a case of dynamite.

Rick fed wire until he reached a spot a hundred

yards up the road, then took out his knife and cut through the thin stuff. He started back to help Scotty and was just in time to see the dark-haired boy with a stick of dynamite in his mouth!

Rick gasped. He started to run toward Scotty, but his pal waved him back. Then, as Rick watched, horrified, he saw Scotty take the stick out of his mouth and motion for him to come ahead.

"What are you doing?" Rick demanded. "I thought for a minute you'd lost all your buttons and started eating dynamite."

"We didn't have crimpers," Scotty explained. "The only way I could get the cap on was to crimp it with my teeth."

Rick turned white. He gulped. No wonder Scotty looked a little pale!

"It worked," Scotty said, a little shakily. "But I don't want to do it as a regular thing."

"I should hope not!" Rick exclaimed fervently. "Give me that stick. I'll connect up. Will one be enough?"

"Plenty," Scotty said. "Get going. I'll connect up the detonator."

By the time Rick had placed the dynamite and connected the wires, Scotty was ready, the detonator in the front seat of the jeep between his legs.

"I wish we had some regular fuse," he said. "Then we could put short fuses on a few sticks, light them, and throw them."

Rick stared at him. "And crimp all the caps with your teeth? Boy, I'm glad we haven't any fuse!"

Scotty's estimate was two minutes off. It took twelve minutes for the troops to come into sight. Watching from behind the banana plants, the boys saw them hiking down the road like a bunch of tenderfeet on their first five-mile hike. It was obvious that discipline in the San Luzian army was slack. The men wore sloppy brown uniforms and a variety of hats. They carried rifles and there were bandoliers of cartridges across their chests and grenades at their belts.

"Can you see?" Rick whispered.

"Fine," Scotty whispered back.

They sat in the jeep, waiting. Rick kept the motor idling, knowing that the sound would be inaudible a short distance away.

The troops reached the point the boys had selected. It was a big papaya about fifty feet beyond the dynamite. Scotty pushed the plunger. The dynamite exploded.

Rick raced the motor, then shifted into gear. Scotty cut the wires loose with one flick of his knife and Rick lurched onto the road and fled toward the hotel as fast as he could accelerate.

Through the rear-view mirror he could see the troops scatter and knew they had slowed things down for a few minutes at least. The last view he had was of one man, evidently an officer, trying to rally the troops again.

Rick rounded the turn leading to the hotel grounds and saw that the scientists were waiting in the jeeps, ready to roll. He slowed long enough to yell, "Let's

go," then led the way down the road to the front of the hotel and into Calor.

The next problem was to find a place to stay. Honorario advised staying away from the big hotels on the beach and suggested a smaller but quite comfortable hostelry on the outskirts of town. Rick was pleased to see that it was located right on the water, at the point where the long San Luz beach began. But he doubted there would be time for swimming.

The Hotel Internationale was comfortable, and more than adequate. The scientists congratulated each other on being able to get rooms. Fortunately, as the manager explained, it was not yet full *turista* time. If they were prepared to double up, two to a room, he could accommodate them.

Rick and Scotty drew a room on the second floor. The bath was down the hall, but they didn't mind that. Hartson Brant and Hobart Zircon shared the largest room, and there was a large porch that could be used as a meeting place.

The hotel also had a basement room that the manager was glad to turn over for the equipment—at a slight fee, naturally. But he boggled when the boys appeared with cases of dynamite on their shoulder.

"Leave it to me," Honorario suggested. "I will find a place that will be safe."

Rick was glad to leave it to Honorario. He was anxious to get in touch with Montoya, to explain what had happened. The police station was not far away. He and Scotty hiked over and found the young captain alone in his office.

Montoya listened to their story, and his face became stern. "There are two possibilities," he said finally. "Either Guevara is mounting a big revolution, or he is interested only in the diamonds. If it is the diamonds, then he probably will keep the troops near the mountain, and the city may not be bothered at all."

"How can we find out?" Rick asked. "Except by waiting to see if troops show up here."

Montoya stared through the window at the tiny harbor of Calor. The boys waited while he thought it over.

Finally the captain swiveled around and faced them. "We can find out, if you will take a chance. I do not think it is much of a chance, really, but it may be. Let us think of things from Guevara's point of view. He knows that you know of these diamonds. He also knows, because he is intelligent, that you surely realize the danger of talking about them. So, what would he do with you if he caught you? Perhaps detain you for a while, but no more. He knows that harm to foreigners would bring down trouble he could not handle. We would have Venezuela, Colombia, Great Britain, and the United States in here. The first three might bring in troops on the pretext of restoring order, but actually to back up their claims to the island. The United States would bring great pressure on all three to do something."

"It makes sense," Rick agreed. "So you don't think we're in any great danger from Guevara?"

"No. If you had been at the hotel, he would have

kept you there, I think. But you were not, so we must see if he is prepared to follow you. My own opinion is that he wants to be let alone to mine diamonds, while he has time. It does not take an invasion of Calor to do this."

"What do you want us to do?" Scotty asked.

"Simply take a ride to the hotel, or as far as you can go. See what the situation really is. If I, or my men, should try this it would surely mean shooting. But you are *extranjeros,*—foreigners. You can get away with it."

"You hope," Rick said.

Montoya's teeth flashed in the first smile they had seen on his face. "Indeed," he agreed. "I hope."

CHAPTER XIV

Night Patrol

THE jeep rolled out of Calor on the highway back to the Hot Springs Hotel. Scotty drove, while Rick relaxed in the seat beside him. They had taken time for a sandwich and coffee, because they were not sure when they might eat again.

Hartson Brant and the scientists were at work on detailed analysis of the day's shots. It would take some time. When Rick told his father about the conversation with Captain Montoya, the scientist had nodded agreement. "It sounds like good sense, especially since there has been no sign of an invasion of the city. The troops could have been here before this. Go ahead, but be cautious. Always leave your escape route open."

It was good advice, and the boys intended to take it.

Scotty drove in silence for a few minutes, then said, "We're nearly at the fork in the road. Keep an eye open."

"Will do," Rick assured him. The left fork was the main, paved road to San Souci. The right fork led up to the hotel.

Scotty reached the fork and slowed.

"There!" Rick pointed.

Twenty yards up the right fork there was a barricade fence, newly made of small logs. Lounging against the fence were a half dozen soldiers.

"We could go left to San Souci, but not to the hotel," Rick said. "Now what?"

"Hold on and be ready for a quick take-off," Scotty muttered. He turned the jeep into the left fork, then shifted and backed around and up the right fork to where the soldiers waited.

One soldier, with sergeant's stripes on his sleeve, sauntered over to them. He carried a rifle, but Rick noted that he didn't hold it at the ready. The boy called, "Do you speak English, sergeant?"

"Leetle beet," the soldier replied. He smiled cordially. "What you weesh, señores?"

"Can we get to the hotel?" Scotty asked.

"No can, señor."

"Why not?" Rick asked.

"Ees . . . how you say? . . . big talk at hotel. Ees *el gobernador y* . . . and . . . *el comandante* Guevara. Also more mens. No one goes to hotel long time. Maybe when talk feenish."

"The governor and lieutenant governor are having a big conference at the hotel?" Rick asked incredulously.

"Ees so, señor."

"How long will this conference last?" Scotty asked.

The sergeant shrugged. "*Quién sabe?* Maybe two day, maybe two *semana* . . . how you say? . . .

"Weeks," Rick supplied. "What are they talking about?"

"Ees . . . how you say? . . . *seguridad nacional.* Thees ees what *el comandante* speaks to us."

Rick glanced at Scotty. "National security conference. Those can last a long time." He looked at the sergeant again. "We could go to San Souci, and from there to the hotel, maybe."

"*Pero no,* señor. That way also ees guard. Ees no way get to hotel. More good you not try, eh? *Soldados* at hotel, they maybe shoots."

"Now we know," Scotty said. "Nothing more to be gained here."

"Did you see the governor?" Rick asked.

"No, señor. But I saw *el comandante* Guevara. But eef he ees here, also *el gobernador. Cómo no?*"

"I guess so," Rick agreed. "*Mil gracias,* sergeant. *Vaya con Dios.* A thousand thanks. Go with God."

"*Y ustedes,*" the sergeant returned politely. "And you, señores."

Scotty let the clutch out and the jeep moved ahead. "Now to call on Captain Montoya," he said. "Right?"

"Right," Rick agreed. "Interesting. Guevara tells the troops he and the governor are having a security conference and should not be interrupted. So guards are posted to protect the hotel. And none of the poor *soldados* realize that blocking the roads also keeps

people away from the volcanic pipe, so Guevara and Connel can start work."

"With Guevara's own men to do the dirty work," Scotty added.

"Too true. Maybe they even have soldiers on the job. I know what else the soldiers are guarding, too. Probably without knowing it."

Scotty turned to look at him. "You thinking the same thing I am?"

"Yep. Somewhere behind that guarded perimeter is the governor. And until we get him out, we're helpless."

"Then," Scotty announced, "we'll just have to get him out."

The jeep almost flew down the road to Calor. Scotty wheeled it through the narrow streets and drew up at the police station. In a moment they were reporting to Captain Montoya.

The young officer listened, then smacked a fist into his palm. "*Bueno!* This is good, *amigos.* We will let Guevara and your Connel have the diamonds, eh? They can use the entire army to guard the mine, if they wish. I hope they do. That means we have the rest of the island in which to maneuver. I have already sent one of my most trusted men to approach the diamond pipe from the north, through Redondo. That way we will know the exact limits."

"But they've got the army," Rick objected. "Where does that leave us?"

"Free to operate in other ways," Montoya said. "The army is occupied, no? Let them stay that way."

His keen eyes examined the two critically. Rick felt a little uncomfortable at the penetrating stare. Then Montoya smiled. "I do not know you," he said flatly. "But I have certain evidence of the kind of young men you are. First, you came to this island. Why? On a mission of mercy, in answer to my uncle's call. It was unselfish, and it was also dangerous. Then, tonight, you took the chance of finding the roadblock. Also, though this may surprise you, we have heard something of the Spindrift Scientific Foundation even here on this island."

Rick was surprised. He knew the Foundation had an international reputation, but he had thought it was limited to scientists.

"So, I have some basis for what I now ask of you," Montoya added. "There is no time to collect those of my men who are completely loyal. It is because they are scattered, searching for some trace of my uncle. I do not wish to take time to wait until they report in."

"What do you want us to do?" Scotty asked.

"It is simple, and not so simple. A large party cannot invade the perimeter Guevara has established, but a very few can perhaps do it. We will be that few. We will go to Casa Guevara. And, if we are lucky, we will rescue my uncle. What do you say?"

The boys exchanged glances. Rick spoke for both of them. "We're with you."

Montoya didn't have to reply. His warm handshake said everything there was to say.

Scotty spoke up. "I've had some experience in

nighttime operations. We will need dark clothes, and something to blacken our faces. We will need weapons. Not guns. If we get into a shooting scrape it will bring the whole army down on us."

"I agree." Montoya opened his desk drawer and drew out a policeman's night stick. He handed it to Scotty. "How about this?"

Scotty hefted it, grinned, and handed it to Rick. It was heavy, and perfectly balanced. Rick guessed it had been drilled and the end filled with lead. "One good thing about this," he said. "No moving parts to get out of order."

Montoya smiled. "True. We will each have one, and I will take my pistol as a last resort. Let us look at the map and memorize it. We will have to go through the jungle to reach the house, and it would be disastrous to lose our way."

"Get a compass," Scotty requested. "We can set a compass course and hit it right on the nose."

Rick looked at his pal. "Marine training?"

"Nope." Scotty grinned. "Boy Scout. But it will come in handy. I think I could take you there anyway, but we'd better have a compass to be sure."

The three bent over the map and worked out the approach to Casa Guevara. For one thing, they agreed to approach as close as possible by jeep. If they found the governor, transportation would be needed. He could not be as fast on foot as might be necessary, because of his age. Besides, they had no idea of his present physical condition.

It was dark when they rolled out of Calor, Rick

driving. All three were dressed in dark clothes, and each had a night stick in his belt. Montoya's pistol was hidden in a shoulder holster.

At the officer's direction, they turned toward the airport, passed it, and headed toward the lighthouse at the extreme southern tip of the island. The road led past the light and along the southern shore, a hundred yards from the sea. Then, as they reached their first turning point, Montoya said, "Slowly. It should be about here."

After a moment he found it, a pair of ruts through the rolling farm land. Rick knew from his study of the map that it was a road on which bananas were hauled from the plantations. It cut across to the main road to San Souci. By taking this route, they would miss the check point near the hotel.

The road was bumpy but passable. Rick kept a steady speed in spite of the jouncing it gave his passengers. They could take it.

Presently there was blacktop ahead. They had reached the road to San Souci. Rick pulled a flashlight from his pocket and pointed it at the odometer, counting off the tenths of a mile as he headed toward the town. When he reached seven-tenths he stopped the jeep.

"Turnoff point," he said. "From now on, we steer our way through the boondocks. Any preferred way, Captain?"

Montoya shrugged. "There is no road, or even a path. Do what you can."

"Okay. Scotty, make sure we head due north."

"Check. Make a 90-degree turn and keep going. I'll correct you."

Rick had only one real concern, and that was that the jeep lights might be visible from the higher elevation of Casa Guevara. But it had to be risked. He thought there wasn't really much of a chance, because the thick foliage would screen them. Besides, anyone seeing the lights might assume it was soldiers making their rounds.

The ground was carpeted with fallen vegetation, but it was the dry season and the earth under the leaves was firm enough. There was little danger of the jeep bogging down, especially in four-wheel drive.

Rick picked his way through the jungle, keeping to clear spots as much as he could. Once it was necessary to butt down a huge banana plant before he could continue, but mostly it was a matter of plowing through scrub. Sometimes a palmetto leaf whipped across his face, and once a thorny bush caught painfully and drew blood.

Scotty navigated, keeping track of their direction. Now and then he spoke. "More to the right when you can. We're about a hundred yards to the left of our base line." Then, "Straighten out. We're on course again."

After what seemed to Rick an eternity of plowing through the heavy growth, Scotty said quietly, "Pick a place to turn around, then kill the lights and motor."

Rick reached a place where there was room, swung

the wheels hard, backed around, and put the jeep in its own tracks facing the other way. He turned off the lights and cut the motor switch. The silence and darkness flooded in.

"Just sit still until our eyes adjust," Scotty said, very quietly. "If I've figured right, we're about a hundred yards from the dirt road, just about in front of the Guevara driveway. We'd better walk the rest of the way, in case of guards."

Rick waited until the blackness lessened. His pupils were fully dilated now, and he could see surprisingly well. There was a moon, but at the moment it was behind a cloud bank. When it emerged, he would be able to see perfectly.

"Let's go," Scotty said. "No more talking now. When I hold up my hand, stop and wait for me."

The ex-Marine took the lead, Montoya following and Rick bringing up the rear. He took the night stick from his belt and hefted it. The weight was comforting in his hand.

Scotty found his way with the ease that Rick always admired. Their steps were noiseless on the carpeted jungle floor. Presently Scotty held up his hand, and Montoya and Rick stopped, waiting. Scotty disappeared ahead of them.

The seconds ticked by. Mosquitoes found them and whined around their heads. Neither moved.

Scotty returned as silently as he had gone. Beckoning them close, he whispered, "One guard at the gateposts. Give me one minute, then walk forward until you reach the road. Call to him in Spanish,

Captain. I want to be sure his attention is on you."

"I understand," Montoya said softly.

Rick put a finger on his pulse and began counting. He could tell his pulse was a little fast. When the count reached ninety he tapped Montoya on the shoulder. But the officer was already moving.

Rick followed close behind, the night stick held in a palm that had grown sweaty with tension. The San Luzian picked his way carefully, but he moved at a good speed. Then, suddenly, he stopped. Rick peered past him and saw the lighter color of the dirt road.

Montoya took a breath, then he called clearly, *"Hola, amigo! Qué pasa?"*

Across the way a figure rose, rifle ready. A suspicious voice called, *"Quién va?"*

There was a soft but definite sound, like a pumpkin dropping on a hard floor. The guard crumpled.

Montoya and Rick moved to Scotty's side with long strides. Scotty was already tying the guard hand and foot with his own belt and rifle sling. Then he took out a handkerchief and tied it into place as a gag. The guard could breathe past it, but yelling would get him little—when he woke up.

"Help me get him into the brush," Scotty whispered. In a moment the guard was out of sight of any casual glance. There wasn't time to hide him with care.

"Up the driveway," Scotty whispered. "I'll lead. When we get near the house, there probably will be other guards, so we'll have to leave the road and take to the bush again. Let's go."

It was an eerie walk. Rick kept expecting a challenge from up ahead, but apparently there was no guard on the driveway itself. It wound through the jungle for a good quarter of a mile before it began to widen out into a clearing.

Scotty motioned and led the way off the road. The march through the jungle began again. Rick plodded ahead, with complete faith in Scotty. He knew his pal was taking them in a circle, but he couldn't have said exactly where they were in relation to the house or the driveway.

Then, suddenly, there were lights ahead!

Scotty moved a few feet more, then sank down into the dense cover. Rick inched to his side, and saw that Montoya was doing the same.

They had a clear view of the two-story house and the surrounding clearing. It was a hacienda very much like those Rick had seen in Mexico, stucco on the outside, probably with heavy brick walls.

And there were guards! He saw the glow of two cigarette butts on the front porch, and another toward the rear. Three so far. Then a figure crossed through the light from a window. Four!

The three invaders waited while the long minutes ticked away. The three were not alone; hordes of night insects joined them and made the wait miserable.

Scotty drew back until his lips were close to Rick's ear. "I'm going to circle the house once. Keep watching."

When Montoya would have followed Scotty, Rick

The three invaders waited while the long minutes ticked away

put a hand on his arm and whispered that they should wait. The two concentrated on watching the windows and the guards. Rick guessed that Guevara was not at home. So far as he could tell, no one was inside the house, at least on his side. There was light in one upstairs window, but the angle was wrong; he couldn't see inside.

The two guards on the front porch stayed there. That was probably their station. Another guard seemed to have the rear corner of the house. The fourth also seemed to be assigned to the rear, but he moved around more than his compatriot. Rick could see that the four were not soldiers. At least they were not in uniform. Probably they were Guevara's personal employees. Bodyguards, perhaps.

Scotty returned, silent as a wraith in the night. He sank to the ground between the two and whispered, "I don't think there's anyone home. Just the four guards. If the governor is here, he's in that upstairs room."

"What do we do?" Rick whispered.

"We'll have to take it from the rear. It will be tough, because there's not much cover."

Scotty began to outline his plan, then stopped suddenly. Rick had a strange feeling in his stomach again, and he realized that the earth was trembling under him. The tremor grew in strength, and from close by there was a snapping sound as a dead limb broke under the vibration and dropped to the jungle floor.

"Now!" Scotty whispered sibilantly. "Come on!"

Instantly Rick and Montoya followed the ex-Marine's lead, withdrawing into the denser brush, then rising and hurrying after him, crouched over and careful not to make a sound.

Scotty led them in a wide circle that brought them finally to the rear of the house. Rick sized up the situation and saw only two trees that offered any cover. The ground was still trembling, although slightly. Then, as he crouched, the temblor increased again.

The guards were disturbed. The two in the rear moved back, away from the house, as though expecting it to fall on them. One of them spoke in Spanish and the other replied curtly.

Montoya sucked in his breath. He whispered, "The first one asked if they should not get the old man out, and the second said let him fall with the house."

The two guards were well back from the house now, staring upward at the second floor. If the stucco started to go, it would be high on the house wall at the roof line.

Scotty touched Rick on the arm, then rose and moved like a dark ghost, straight across the open glade toward the guards. Scotty reached the tree nearest the house and slipped into its shadow.

Rick sized things up. The other tree was perhaps thirty feet away from Scotty, and about ten feet closer to the jungle's edge. The guards were still looking at the house. Rick moved, bent low, night stick firmly clutched in his hand. He sensed that Montoya was close behind him.

He straightened up in the shadow of the tree, his eyes on Scotty. His pulse was speeding and his breathing was short and shallow. Montoya crouched next to him, ready to move.

Rick saw Scotty bend and pick up something. He saw Scotty wave toward them, then saw Scotty throw something. The object crashed into the stucco of the house high on the second floor, then it tumbled to the ground. Scotty had thrown a rock!

The guards stiffened, thinking that the sound was the first evidence that the house was falling. Scotty moved like a streak, and Rick charged forward with club held high. Montoya was even faster.

The two guards, interested only in the house, never knew what hit them. Rick eased one to the ground as his knees crumpled after Montoya's vicious swing. Scotty had the other; he had knocked him out and caught him before he fell.

The three left the guards and hurried to the back door. Montoya motioned, and took over the lead. He snaked the pistol out of his shoulder holster and held it ready.

For an instant they paused in what seemed to be a pantry, then moved into the kitchen beyond. Rick could see a hallway leading straight to the front door. The door was solid wood, and it was closed.

Montoya gestured with the pistol and led the way. Then, motioning the boys back, he boldly opened the door and strode out.

The surprised front guards stared into the pistol muzzle. Montoya spoke in crisp Spanish that Rick

couldn't follow, but the meaning was amply clear. The guards' hands shot high. Montoya stepped aside and the guards walked into the house like lambs.

"Tie them!" Montoya snapped.

A cord from the Venetian blinds was the most convenient tie material. Scotty cut it loose with a sweep of his scout knife and slashed it into two pieces. While Montoya held his pistol on the guards the boys tied their arms behind them, lashing their elbows together.

"Now," the police captain said, "let us find my uncle."

The stairs led up from the hallway. Montoya took them two at a time, the boys close behind. At the top of the stairs, the officer called in Spanish. There was an answer from a room on the left.

The door was locked, but the key was hanging from a hook on the wall. In a moment the two Montoyas were greeting each other with a warm embrace, and then with a more formal handshake.

The governor greeted the two Spindrifters with a bow and a handshake, and then inquired, "What good providence brought you here, nephew mine?"

"We knew you were here," Montoya said, "because there was no other place where Guevara could have hid you."

"Let's discuss it later," Rick urged. "Those guards out back will be coming to, and we want to be out of here."

"You are right," Montoya agreed instantly. "We are not yet in the clear, señor uncle. We must hurry."

"Into the jungle," Scotty said. "Once in the brush and we're okay. They'll never catch us then."

Montoya hefted the pistol he still held in his left hand.

"It will be better for them if they do not," he said quietly.

CHAPTER XV

Stalemate

GOVERNOR LUIS MONTOYA paced the floor of his office. Seated in the comfortable chairs were the Spindrift scientists, Captain Montoya, and the boys.

"We are in a difficult situation," the governor stated. "Guevara controls the army, and the army controls the area in which you must work. We need the army if we are to evacuate the island. My nephew and his fellow police are efficient, but their number is too small."

"Is there any possibility of getting outside help?" Hartson Brant asked.

"I am afraid not. Our difficult political situation makes it almost impossible to obtain any fast action. We would need to approach three governments at the same time. They would have to have conferences, to agree on how the help was to be given. Each would be afraid to let the other help, you see, for fear of giving up its claim to sovereignty over us. No, I'm afraid we must find our own solution."

"You are the governor," Hobart Zircon pointed out. "Wouldn't the troops respond to your orders?"

The governor shrugged. "You can be sure our efficient lieutenant governor has his own men in key positions. But what you suggest has occurred to me, and I must make the attempt. First, however, I must alert the people of the island. The danger must be described to them."

"How?" Julius Weiss asked.

"By radio. We have our own government radio here. I think Esteben and I should go on the air at once. He can describe what is going on under El Viejo. I will ask the people to assemble at the docks." He turned to his nephew. "Ricardo, send two of your most trusted men to Redondo and San Souci. They must persuade the fishermen to load their families and villagers, then come to Calor. We will need to crowd all fishing boats for many trips if we are to get the people off."

"At once, señor," Montoya replied. He hurried to the door and gave orders to the police guard. The handful of police were now the sole security force of the island. The chief of police was personally supervising the government's safety, somewhere outside the building. Only two officers were still on regular police duty. The rest were either guarding the executive office or awaiting orders.

"Where can the people be taken?" Balgos asked.

"I think we will send them to Curaçao and Bonaire. Those islands are close, and they belong to the Netherlands. The Dutch are hospitable, no? And we

avoid entanglement with England, Venezuela, and Colombia."

It sounded reasonable to Rick. He asked, "Aren't there ships in the harbor? I mean, big ships?"

"One freighter, and two interisland cargo ships of the C-1 class. All three fly the flag of Panama. We will have the harbor master speak to their captain and attempt to hire them. I am sure they will cooperate."

"I'm sure that if you asked for help from the United States they'd send all available U. S. Navy ships in the area," Dr. David Riddle said.

The governor smiled warmly. "That is our ace in the hole, as you would call it, Señor Riddle. The world knows that the Americans are always ready to help. But perhaps there will be no need. We will see."

The building shook slightly and Rick waited, holding his breath. But the temblor subsided. It was the third one within an hour, he thought. The magma must be moving fast.

"Now, gentlemen, I must get busy. Ricardo, I leave the details of moving our people in your hands. I will go to the roadblocks and see if these soldiers can be persuaded that their governor speaks for the people. But first, Esteben, you and I will go to the government radio and speak to the people. Our talk will be put on tape, and repeated over and over. *Vamos.* Let us go. Time is getting short."

At Montoya's request, Rick and Scotty had agreed to remain with the governor, in company with two

police sergeants. The scientists returned to the hotel, to continue their attempts to predict the magma movement based on data already in hand. New data would be obtained as soon as the situation cleared up.

The governor, Balgos, Rick, Scotty, and the governor's secretary drove in the official car, a huge American import. The two police sergeants led the way in one of the island's two police cruisers.

The radio station was only a few blocks away. These were the studios. The transmitter was on the coast a mile south of Calor. Rick was pleased to see that the equipment was modern, the staff apparently efficient.

A musical program was interrupted and the governor and Balgos put on the air at once. Rick's Spanish was too poor to permit him to follow the discussion, but he gathered that the governor told the people of the scientific mission, and then Balgos described the situation. The governor returned to the mike with a plea for instant evacuation.

Tape recorders rolled while the speech was on. At the governor's orders, the tapes would be replayed every hour on the hour from now on.

It was getting very late. The night was warm and pleasant, and the clouds had vanished leaving a brilliant moon shining down on San Luz. It was a lovely island, Rick thought. The greed of two men, Connel and Guevara, had prevented any possibility of action to save it. Now, evacuation of the people was the only possibility.

Ricardo Montoya met the governor's party as they

emerged from the studios. He reported rapidly to his uncle, speaking English in courtesy to the Americans.

"Men are on the way to the fishing villages, señor. The harbor master is speaking to the ships in the harbor, and already one C-1 is agreeing to take the people. I have spoken with the airlines managers at the airport, and they are trying to obtain many aircraft from the nearby cities. Your own aircraft is being made ready for instant take-off."

It was the first Rick had heard of a government plane. "What kind is it?" he asked.

"A very ancient, but very reliable Douglas, of the DC-3 type. We hold it in reserve, Rick. Your scientists, the governor, and our police will be the last to leave the island. I have counted the numbers. If you can carry four, our plane will carry the rest."

Rick nodded. It was nice to know there would be a way out, even though he hadn't considered the necessity until that moment. He was glad Ricardo Montoya was thinking ahead.

"Now," the governor stated, "I must visit the army."

"I will go with you," the police captain said instantly.

"No, Ricardo. There is too much for you to do. I will be safe. There is no enemy but Guevara. No soldier would harm me."

Rick admired the little governor's courage, but he wasn't as sure of their safety as the old man seemed to be. "I think we'd better be armed," Scotty said.

Ricardo Montoya had met them in the island's

other police cruiser. He said, "Wait," and hurried to the car. Pulling down the rear seat, he disclosed a gunrack. From it he drew two riot guns, automatic shotguns with short barrels.

"Can you use these?" he asked.

Scotty nodded an affirmative. "Both Rick and I have fired automatic shotguns on a skeet range. These can't be much different."

"They are not. The safety is behind the trigger guard. There is no shell in the chamber now, but there are nine in the magazine. Go with God, señores."

The governor's car with its police escort rolled through the streets of Calor, en route to the roadblock at the hotel road. Rick and Scotty held the riot guns, both hoping that they would not be needed.

The governor chatted calmly, as though this were simply a routine sightseeing trip. "Few Americans come to San Luz. We had hoped that perhaps an advertising campaign might bring more of you to our island. We have much to offer, you will agree. Have you tried our swimming yet? I appreciate there has been little opportunity for pleasure."

The boys answered politely, but neither could really get into the swing of the conversation. It took a kind of experience they did not yet have, to talk of casual things while en route to what might be genuine danger.

The governor's secretary called over his shoulder, "There is the roadblock, señor. How shall I approach?"

"Drive up to it, Juan. Be very casual."

Rick fingered the safety on his riot gun. He could see dark figures at the barricade fence.

The car drew to a stop. The governor said quietly, "Perhaps you had better stand by the car. Do not let your guns be seen. If necessary, you will know what to do."

One boy got out on either side, leaving the car doors open. The doors shielded them and the riot guns. The governor got out and walked briskly to the barricade and spoke in Spanish.

It was light enough so Rick could see the men at the barricade clearly. He realized suddenly that they were not dressed as the soldiers had been earlier; these men seemed to be farmers. But they had rifles, and two hand grenades hanging from their belts.

He couldn't follow the exchange in Spanish. The governor was talking in a quiet voice with one man who was better dressed than the rest. The man's voice was cultured, but mocking in tone.

Rick heard the secretary draw in his breath sharply, and he surreptiously got ready to pump a shell into the riot gun's chamber. But nothing happened. Esteben Balgos muttered, "This is unbelievable!"

Then the governor was coming back. He got into the car and spoke quietly. "Back to Calor, Juan."

The boys got in and closed the doors. The secretary swung the big car around and headed back the way they had come. Governor Montoya took time to light an aromatic cigar. Only when it was going well did he speak.

"An interesting talk, señores. Those were not soldiers, but the peons—how do you say it?—tenant farmers of Jaime Guevara. The man with whom I talked is his foreman. They have replaced the troops at all barricades, and their loyalty is only to Guevara."

"But the troops?" Balgos asked.

"Either guarding the volcanic pipe or working in it. I am told that Guevara is now the governor of the island. He has taken over. If I try to resist, it will mean bloodshed. If I leave the island, all will remain quiet and peaceful."

"That's nonsense!" Rick exploded. "Guevara can't get away with it!"

"No? He is getting away with it, Señor Rick. We have a dozen policemen; he has the army. He also has his own men, at key points. So what can we do? We haven't enough force to fight. Besides, there is no time. We can't arm the people because we have neither weapons nor time."

"But what can we do?" Scotty demanded.

"I do not know. At least we can continue our efforts to get the people off the island. Without the ability to make scientific readings, we cannot know how much time is left, so we must hurry. We will do the best we can. After that—well, you had a Spanish song in America that says it well. You recall the title? *'Qué será será.'*"

Rick remembered. An expression of fatalism. What will be, will be.

CHAPTER XVI

The Brant Approach

THE magma drove upward, melting its way through the fractured rock of the channels under the western side of the island. Now and then it struck rock with a higher water content, and the island shuddered under a new explosion as the steam expanded.

Rick felt the bed shake under him and sat upright. A new day had dawned, and there was much to do. He and Scotty had volunteered to help Captain Ricardo Montoya plan the evacuation of the island, and the youthful officer had accepted with pleasure. He had agreed to meet them for breakfast.

The scientists had worked late, trying to extrapolate their data into some kind of prediction. Rick and Scotty, tired after an exhausting day, had gone to bed while the light still burned in Hartson Brant's room.

Scotty awoke as Rick's feet hit the floor. "I'm getting used to these little earthquakes," he said. "Don't know if I'll be able to sleep on steady ground after this."

"The ground is going to get unsteadier," Rick reminded. "Until—boom!"

"I'm not forgetting," Scotty said grimly. "Let's get dressed and eat. I'm famished."

"It's ham and eggs for me," Rick told him. "If I had to watch milk slosh around in a cereal bowl I'd get seasick."

The boys dressed rapidly and hurried down to the hotel coffee shop. They were just in time. Ricardo Montoya walked in just as they were seated.

The officer joined them. Rick noted that his face was drawn and tired, and thought Montoya had probably been up a good part of the night. "How's the evacuation going?" Rick asked.

Montoya shook his head. "Poorly. My uncle's radio broadcast continued all night and through the morning hours. A few families have come to the harbor, and the stevedores are organized now to get them aboard ship. A few fishing boats have come, with fishermen's families, but there is no big exodus."

"Don't they realize the danger?" Scotty exclaimed.

"Perhaps. You must understand my people. They have lived with earthquakes all their lives. Not so often, perhaps, but these temblors are not unusual. What is there to be excited about? Who believes El Viejo will explode? It never has, so it never will."

Rick thought it over. "Maybe not enough are hearing the broadcasts."

"That is possible. I have put volunteers to work going from house to house, asking people to turn on their radios to hear the governor, and also to explain

the urgency. But it will take a long time, even in Calor."

"If we only had the troops," Rick said thoughtfully. "Trained manpower is what's needed for a job like this."

"True. And I think if my uncle could only talk to the troops they would believe him. But he cannot reach them. Guevara's peons would never let him by."

The hotel loud-speaker system drowned out his last words as a soft feminine voice paged someone in Spanish.

"If only the troops could listen to the radio," Rick commented. "Perhaps they'd believe him and turn on Guevara."

"Perhaps. But soldiers cannot afford radios, and they are away from their barracks now. There is no way for my uncle's voice to reach them."

There had to be, Rick thought. There had to be some way. The loud-speaker sounded again, paging a Señor Alvarez. Rick sat bolt upright. Why not use a loud-speaker?

"Listen," he said excitedly. "If the government radio station has a loud-speaker system, or can make one, we can put it in my plane. I can fly the governor over the troops and he can talk to them direct. My plane can go slowly enough, and low enough for that!"

"How about power supply?" Scotty asked.

"There must be an inverter on the island somewhere. We can use automobile batteries, and the inverter will give us 110 AC for a while, until the bat-

teries run down. Just twenty minutes of power would be enough and we can get that with enough batteries!"

Scotty chuckled. "The Brant approach," he said. "There always is one. How about it, Captain?"

"We will try," Montoya said decisively. "You have not eaten? . . . Then do so, while I make a phone call to the radio station. I have had coffee and rolls, and perhaps there will be time to join you for more breakfast while the radio engineers get the equipment together."

The boys were just finishing ham and eggs when Montoya returned. There was a broad smile on his tired face.

"The engineers say it can be done. They have a portable loud-speaker system, and there is an inverter, as you call it, at the transmitter. What is this inverter?"

"It's an electric generator," Rick explained. "Battery current turns it, and it produces 110-volt alternating current. But inverters aren't very efficient, and they take a lot of battery current. That's why we'll need as many batteries as we can carry."

"The chief radio engineer said he understood exactly what was needed. He will gather the materials and meet us at the airport. Now, I think we have time for coffee, and perhaps I can follow your example with ham and eggs. It will take an hour for the equipment to be ready. Also, I called my uncle. He will be waiting for our call."

"Did you get any sleep last night?" Scotty asked.

Montoya smiled. "Sleep? I have forgotten what it is. But perhaps if this plan of yours works, I will remember, eh? Then I can sleep tonight."

A check with the hotel desk told Rick that the scientists had left word that they were not to be disturbed until later in the morning except for an emergency. They had worked a good part of the night, apparently with no satisfactory results.

The boys waited until Ricardo Montoya had breakfasted, then rode with him to the airport. There was another wait while the radio engineers arrived, bringing the loud-speaker equipment.

Rick supervised the placement of the amplifier in the rear seat. The inverter was placed on the floor, and wedged into place with scrap lumber. The automobile batteries were put into the luggage compartment behind the rear seat and were also wedged in place.

Wires were run from the amplifier through the rear-seat windows, which were opened just enough to take the thin cables. The leads were then brought out to the plane's struts. Two large loud-speakers were attached to the struts. At first there was some difficulty in figuring out a secure attachment, but the chief engineer, a resourceful type, managed to find a pair of U bolts somewhere in the hangars. They did the job nicely.

The chief engineer connected up, then hung the microphone between the two front seats. He threw a switch and the inverter started up with a whine. At the throw of a second switch, the loud-speakers broke

into a hum. The engineer tapped on the microphone, and the tap, greatly amplified, reverberated across the airstrip.

"It works!" Rick exclaimed, delighted.

"*Cómo no?*" the engineer said with a smile. He spoke to Montoya in Spanish. The officer translated. "There is one more thing. He has rigged a cable with a switch box so you can operate the controls from the front seat. When the cable is attached, you will be ready. I will go call my uncle."

Rick and Scotty watched as the engineer got busy, hooking the remote-switch cable into the amplifier.

"Room for only two," Rick pointed out. "Want to toss for it?"

Scotty shook his head. "It was your idea. I'll stay on the ground. Take the governor and talk those troops into submission."

"Maybe," Rick said. "We'll see. I think it depends on whether or not they know the real story. If they have any idea there are diamonds around, they won't be interested in anything else."

"Guevara wouldn't dare to let them in on it," was Scotty's opinion. "I'll bet they're just following orders, with no idea what's behind all this. Most of them probably think there really is a national security conference going on."

Rick thought Scotty was probably right. Time would tell. He waited until the engineer signaled that the job was done, then climbed into the pilot's seat. He checked the plane over. Plenty of gas. Everything seemed okay. He tried the loud-speaker switches,

then spoke into the microphone. He could hear his voice boom out with thunderous amplification and saw Scotty clap his hands to his ears.

Finally, he started the motor and let the plane warm, keeping an eye on his gauges. When the manifold temperature got high enough he cut the switch. He tested the control surfaces and he was satisfied. Now all he needed was the governor.

Governor Montoya arrived within ten minutes. He inspected the plane and its equipment and nodded his approval. "Very ingenious. Shall we try it?"

"Yes, sir." Rick helped the governor in, buckled his safety belt, then ran around and got into the pilot's seat. He started the motor, waved to Scotty and the others, then taxied out to the runway. The tower gave him clearance and he took off.

"We'll make a swing over the area and locate the troops," he explained, "then I'll slow down as much as I can, and you can talk."

Rick climbed to a thousand feet and set a course directly for the Hot Springs Hotel. He asked, "Sir, how many troops are there?"

"Our army numbers three companies, of about two hundred and fifty men each. Then we have a few special units, including the transportation platoons. Perhaps nine hundred in all. We do not need a large army. But we need some kind of force. These are troubled times, and there is always some danger that a revolutionary force might consider us an excellent staging or training base for an invasion of a nearby country. So, we keep prepared."

The Sky Wagon was over the hotel within minutes. Rick spotted a large group of soldiers—he estimated about two hundred—dispersed around the hotel. They probably thought they were guarding the conference.

He banked left and followed the contour of the mountain, and found another group of soldiers camped near the pumice works.

"That is two companies accounted for, more or less," the governor stated. "Now, can we find the third?"

It wasn't difficult. Rick followed the dirt road to San Souci, and found the third large group marching in the direction of the mountain, apparently about to join forces with the group at the pumice works.

"Let's take a look at the diamond pipe," he suggested, and pulled the Sky Wagon around in a tight circle. He had his bearings, and the third shot station was not difficult to locate. There was considerable activity. Earth-moving machinery had been moved into place and was operating. The yellow ground was already gone, and the equipment was cutting into the blue kimberlite below.

Military trucks were lined up, apparently waiting to be loaded with the blue earth.

"Where are they taking it?" the governor wondered.

Rick had talked with David Riddle about the process. "They need water. The blue earth is run down long wooden tables with cleats on them, like

washing out gold. The table is coated with grease. The diamonds stick in the grease and the blue earth washes away. They've probably set things up at the pumice works if there's water there. Otherwise, it may be the hotel."

"It has to be the hotel, then," the governor explained. "There would not be enough water at the pumice plant. Well, I think we have found all our troops. Those who are not with the three companies are below us, digging diamonds. I wonder if they know what they are digging?"

Rick told the governor what Scotty had said.

"That is probably right," the governor agreed. "Guevara would not dare to let too many in on the secret. Well, shall we get to work?"

"Yes, sir," Rick said. He handed the governor the microphone and swung into position for a run over the troops on the road. He throttled down, and then gave the plane a few degrees of flaps. He kept an eye on his air-speed indicator. If he got too slow, the plane would stall and he'd be too low to recover. "I'll make as tight a circle as I can," he said. "Be ready."

The troops came into sight. Rick lost altitude and began a slow circle only a few hundred feet over the marching soldiers. He turned on the switches and nodded.

The governor began to talk in slow, clear Spanish. Rick understood that he identified himself to the men below, but then he lost the trend of the talk. He concentrated on flying. The loud-speakers were

operating perfectly, and he knew the troops could hear.

He could see them looking up and pointing, but they kept marching. Apparently the governor wasn't making much of an impact. The governor paused, and Rick cut the switches.

"Maybe they don't believe it's you," he suggested.

"Perhaps not. But my voice is well known. I speak over the radio at least once a week. More likely the whole idea is just too much for them. Who can believe that mountain over there is about to blow up?"

"Let's try the troops at the pumice works. Maybe you can tell them that all who care about their homeland should march at once to Calor."

"I'll try it," the governor agreed.

Rick circled low over the pumice works while the loud-speakers blasted at the troops below. They watched the plane, they pointed, some ran out for a better look. But when the governor pleaded with them to hurry to Calor to help save the people of the island, nothing happened.

"If El Viejo started smoking, they'd move fast enough," Rick said bitterly. "But then it would be too late. They just don't believe there is any danger, and maybe they're not sure it's you. I guess no one has ever given them orders from the air before."

"They are simple people," the governor agreed. "I think most of them have never heard of a volcano. They don't even know what an eruption is. How can they be excited? If I ever succeed in get-

ting good schools here, this may change. But it won't help us now."

Rick considered. It would do little good to repeat the announcement to the soldiers at the hotel. He wondered if Guevara and Connel were somewhere below, and with that thought he turned toward the diamond pipe.

"Let's see if we can do any good with the truckmen," he suggested. "Tell them the trucks are essential to the safety of their families."

The governor tried, while Rick held the plane in in a tight circle over the blue ground. Again, there was interest in the flying loud-speaker plane itself, but the message made no impact. Then Rick noticed tiny spurts of fire from one edge of the diamond field and cold sweat started on his forehead as he suddenly realized what they were.

"They're shooting at us!" he exclaimed, and gave the plane the gun, taking evasive action as the distance widened.

"I saw," the governor said wearily. "It was not the troops. It was the peons. Our friend Guevara is down there, I think. But he need not be afraid of our effect. We have had none."

Rick had seldom felt so frustrated. He was tempted to call the San Luzians a stupid bunch of cattle, but he realized the governor had stated the case accurately. They just didn't understand the danger. What would they understand?

His lips formed the word. "Diamonds!" At least they would understand treasure.

"Sir," he said excitedly, "we can break this up, at least enough so we can start collecting data again. If we tell them the whole story, they'll at least understand that Guevara is after great treasure. They'll flock to the diamond field and disrupt the operation, and we can move back in to some of the shot stations. The people won't be any worse off than they are now, and it will give us a chance to do something!"

The governor considered. "Perhaps that is the only solution. It will not get my people to safety, but it will at least give us a chance to find out the exact situation. When I talked with your father this morning he said they needed more data or they could tell nothing about the timing of the eruption. If we get that data, then I will ask the Americans for troops. If we must, we will take the people off by armed force and save their lives in spite of themselves!"

Rick circled and lost altitude again. He got into position over the marching troops and turned on the switches, then gave the governor the signal.

Later, the governor told him what he had said:

"Soldiers of San Luz! Do you know why you are protecting this area? It is not because of a great conference. It is because Lieutenant Governor Guevara has found a great treasure! He is using you to help him to become the wealthiest man in the world! But what will you get out of this? Nothing! He will give you nothing! Go for yourself and see the blue earth. It is found only near mountains like

"They're shooting at us!" Rick exclaimed, and gave the plane the gun

El Viejo. Do you know what it contains? Diamonds! The most valuable gems in the whole world! Will you let Guevara use you to make himself rich while you get nothing? Do not be fools! Help yourselves to this wealth. Look for the crystal pebbles, the ones like cloudy glass, among the blue stones. Go! You are soldiers! Take your share!"

"They're running!" Rick pounded on the control wheel with excitement. "Look! They're breaking ranks and running!"

"Excellent," the governor said calmly. "Now the other groups. Then, in spite of the rifle fire, let us go and tell those at the diamond pipe what they are doing. They will not hit us with those rifles."

Rick knew that was true. A lucky shot might hit them, but it took practice to hit a fast-flying plane, even with automatic weapons. "Let's go," he said.

CHAPTER XVII

Solution: Nuclear

SAN LUZ was in a state of complete chaos. The majority of the island people dropped everything as the word of treasure spread, and the slopes of El Viejo were covered with treasure hunters using everything from shovels to pointed sticks in an effort to find *los diamantes*. Only a bare handful even knew that the diamonds occurred only in a small volcanic pipe on the western slope.

If the hunt continued, Rick thought, the slopes would be denuded of vegetation.

There was intermittent fighting around the volcanic pipe, the police reported. Guevara's peons had succeeded in holding the diamond pipe, but were surrounded by soldiers. Now and then Guevara attempted to clear the entire area, but with the entire army struggling to dig diamonds he wasn't having much success. The police officer who investigated also reported that an American was with Guevara. That would be Connel, of course.

The scientists had moved at once to start shooting again, with the police pushing back the diamond seekers until the dynamite could be set off in safety. The crazed hunters assumed that the explosions were also means of seeking the diamonds, and rushed to the craters before the smoke had cleared.

No one really cared. The data was being collected, and it showed that the situation was growing extremely serious.

"Ten days maximum," Zircon said. "Maybe less. The magma has about reached that rock dike, and once it melts through, there goes the mountain."

"We must get the people off," Governor Montoya insisted. "That is the first thing. I shall call at once for help from the Americans. They have forces at the Canal Zone and also in the West Indies. They will send help."

"Yes," Hartson Brant agreed. "But first, we have a proposal. We will need the troops, but we may also need other help."

Governor Montoya looked at him keenly. "This proposal is perhaps a solution for El Viejo?"

"Perhaps. Let me outline the situation." The scientist pointed out the magma on Dr. Williams' sketch. "This is where the magma is now. Above it is a very thick layer of rock in which we can find no major weakness. It may hold the magma for a while. At least it probably will melt slowly."

He pointed to a little line running from the western slope of the mountain down to the rock

dike. "This was where we wanted to dig a channel. Now it is too late to go all the way to the rock. The heat would be too great. But if we could drive a hole through, with great suddenness, the magma would be released and the eruption would be away from the island and into the sea."

"How would you do this?" the governor asked.

"By getting help from the U. S. government, from Army Engineers and Seabees, who are U. S. Navy engineers. We would drive the tunnel as far down as time permitted. Of course we would keep track of the magma constantly. Then, as time ran out, we would place a charge in the hole—a shaped charge, as it is called—which would drive the hole most of the way to the magma. It would also crack the rock dike. The magma would seek the weakest spots, of course. It is under enormous pressure. And we would have the result we want."

"But what kind of explosive would be enough for such an undertaking?" Montoya demanded. "Not enough dynamite could be packed into the tunnel to do the work."

"We weren't thinking of dynamite," Hartson Brant said quietly. "We were thinking of a nuclear explosion."

Rick gasped. He had no warning of this. The scientists had evidently arrived at the conclusion while he was flying around over the diamond seekers.

Montoya gasped, too. "But that would kill everyone on the island!"

"Not at all," Zircon boomed. "It would kill no one. Of course we would clear the area with troops."

"But the radioactivity," the governor protested. "I have read it is deadly!"

"Only if it can reach people," Hartson Brant explained. "This shot would be far underground. There would be no fall-out, as it is called, at all. Of course the earth around the explosion would be greatly radioactive. Some of the activity would be trapped in the magma. But where would it come to rest? On the bottom of the sea. There might be some danger to bottom fish in the vicinity, but I think the water would get so hot from the lava that fish would avoid it, anyway. And eventually the radioactivity would decay of itself to low levels. Sir, I see no other way."

The governor raised his hands in a gesture of resignation. "I know nothing of these matters, and it is your business to know. I accept your assurances without reservation. Now, what do we do?"

The scientists had not only conceived the solution, but had a detailed plan of action. Within a half hour, the loud-speaker had been removed from the plane, and Rick was flying Governor Montoya, Hartson Brant, and Esteben Balgos to Trinidad.

Arrangements had been made by phone while they were en route. A car, sent by the President of the West Indies Federation, picked them up at the airport and whisked them to the Federation's headquarters.

The President listened to the story with intense

interest, then summoned the American ambassador and the representatives of Venezuela and Colombia.

After a detailed discussion by Hartson Brant of the properties and limitations of nuclear explosions, the conference agreed. Immediate action was called for. The Venezuelan and Colombian representatives hurried off to notify their governments, while the President of the Federation put in a conference call to the United States, to the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, and the President's Special Assistant for Science and Technology, who happened to be an old friend of Hartson Brant's.

A personal phone call from a head of state was without precedent—especially a conference call. The U. S. officials were located within an hour, and the call put through. On the West Indies end were the Federation's President, the U. S. ambassador, Governor Montoya, and Hartson Brant, speaking from four different rooms. Rick hung over his father's chair, listening.

The Federation's President introduced himself and described the problem briefly. Then he introduced the governor. Montoya said briefly, "Gentlemen, we must have help or the island of San Luz will perish. I ask help on behalf of my 32,000 people."

The Federation's President then introduced Hartson Brant. Rick gathered that the U. S. President's Special Assistant and the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission both greeted him warmly as an old friend.

The scientist outlined the problem and its solution. He continued, "According to our estimates, we will need ten kilotons in order to have a margin of safety. It will take as many Seabees or engineers as necessary to drive a tunnel. The tunnel dimensions will depend on what machinery you can get to us. I leave that to your experts. We will also need about five thousand sea-based troops to handle the island population. We may have to carry them bodily to safety. Now, can it be done?"

There was silence as the scientist listened. Rick stood on one foot, then the other, waiting. He could hear the mumble of voices through the earphone but could make no sense out of it.

Presently Hartson Brant said, "Yes. I believe the runway at San Luz could handle a C-124." There was silence again. Finally, the scientist said, "I'll look forward to seeing you tomorrow, then." He hung up and turned to Rick with a grin.

"Our President will put pressure on the local Venezuelan and Colombian ambassadors here for an immediate decision from their governments, and our own Secretary of State will instruct our ambassadors in Venezuela and Colombia to camp on the doorsteps until they get agreement. He will also notify the United Nations, and invite observers from the Security Council. The AEC will fly in a 10-KT nuclear charge and a group of experts. The Secretary of Defense promised that a battalion of Seabees with full equipment would arrive in San Luz within twenty-four hours. The Military Air Transport Service will

airlift in enough troops to handle the crowd. Any questions?"

Rick grinned back. "It sounds as though everyone's in the act but the British."

"Oh, they're in it, too. The Federation's President will represent their political interests, but we'll also have a British cruiser standing offshore for help as needed. And I forgot an important addition. Our President's Assistant for Science and Technology is notifying the proper committees of the National Academy of Sciences. We'll have a planeload of geophysicists down here in a few days to get all the scientific data possible out of this event. So we're well covered."

"I guess we can relax now," Rick said with relief. "The job is out of our hands."

"Not quite," Hartson Brant corrected. "They all agreed that the Spindrift Foundation should be placed in over-all charge. So we've got our work cut out for us!"

CHAPTER XVIII

The Seabees

THE sea off the west coast of San Luz was alive with ships. Rick counted up to twenty-five and then gave up. Some of the ships were moving, and he was sure he had counted the same one three times. He identified cruisers, destroyers, one aircraft carrier with a squadron of helicopters aboard, and landing ships of several kinds.

One huge landing ship was nosed right up to the shore, and from it rolled tons of heavy equipment. From an attack transport, the equipment's operators, a U. S. Naval Construction Battalion—Seabees—were disembarking by the hundreds.

Scotty asked, "How many different kinds of flags can you see? I've counted six so far. U. S., British, Dutch, Venezuelan, Colombian, and Panamanian."

"It's an international job, all right," Rick agreed. "And when the UN observers arrive tonight you can run up a few more flags, too."

"Reminds me of the amphibious exercises we used

to have in the Marines," Scotty commented to Rick.

Nearby, Hartson Brant and the other scientists were deep in conversation with a group of civilians and Navy officers. The officers were the engineers, from the Naval Construction Battalion. Last night had been spent in working with them on the details of the problem. It would be their job to drive the big hole down into the earth below El Viejo, working against time to intercept the rising magma.

Scientists had arrived, too, and they were taking over much of the detail of keeping track of the magma. Each scientist had his own special field of interest, but all were anxious to have the data from tracings. There were geophysicists, including volcanologists and seismologists; mineralogists and more geologists.

"Nothing much left for us to do," Rick said, a little sadly.

"Except watch," Scotty corrected. "That's enough! Great crumbling craters, what do you want? A mystery every day?"

Rick had to grin. "I guess this is enough. But one thing I want to do is go over to the volcanic pipe and see how Guevara and Connel are making out."

"You will have an escort," a voice said from behind them. They turned to greet Ricardo Montoya. "Now that we can turn our attention to that pair, I think we should have a talk with them. To make the talk easier, we will put bars between us."

"You're going to arrest them?" Rick asked.

"Of course! What did you think?"

"Right now?"

"If you want to come along, join me. Now is as good a time as any. If we can find them, of course."

The boys joined Montoya in the front seat of a military vehicle. The back was loaded with his men. Montoya at once steered for the trail to the volcanic pipe. It was only a thousand yards to the north from the point selected for the big hole. Even around the site of the hole there were diamond seekers, and it was hard to find a piece of ground that had not been tried with a shovel.

As they got closer to the diamond field the numbers of treasure hunters increased until, as Scotty remarked, they were thicker than fleas at a mutt show. Montoya had to lean on the horn continually, and even then the San Luzians paid little attention.

Finally the group got out and walked. It was easier to move on foot through the frantically digging mob. Strangely, there was little noise. Each individual seemed intent on his own little hole. But the digging was futile. There was no yellow ground under the flying shovels.

Then the group did reach yellow ground, and met rifles in the hands of Guevara's peons. Evidently Guevara had put a ring of men around the volcanic pipe and planned to hold it by force of arms.

Rick looked at Montoya. What would he do now?

The young officer looked haughtily at the nearest peons and demanded in Spanish, "Do you know me?"

One of them nodded respectfully. "*Sí*, Señor Capitán Montoya."

"Good. You will stand aside. I am inspecting Señor Guevara's mine." He stalked through as though there was not the slightest question that the peons would allow it. The boys and the police officers followed on his heels.

A shelter had been erected on one side of the volcanic pipe. Only blue ground showed, and there was a power scoop digging out more. Watching the shovel were Guevara and Brad Connel.

Montoya walked up to the pair before they were even aware of his presence.

"Good afternoon, señores," he greeted them courteously.

Guevara snapped, "What are you doing here, Montoya?"

"Arresting you, señor," Montoya replied calmly.

Connel looked worried, but Guevara gestured toward the ring of men with rifles. "Don't be a fool. We outnumber you five to one. You haven't a chance."

Captain Montoya smiled affably. "But, señor, it is you who haven't a chance. Consider, señor. The honor of the Montoyas requires that I take you to my uncle, eh? Well, I allow the chance that perhaps I will not survive to take you to my uncle, but I can assure you that you will become a lifeless body on the instant a rifle is raised. Surely you do not doubt me, señor?"

Guevara looked at the officer, looked at the capable hand on the cocked gun in the holster. Then he looked into the fierce Montoya eyes, and his swarthy face turned pale.

"Not even a Montoya would throw his life away for so small a thing," he said harshly.

The captain smiled gently. "Call my bluff, señor."

Rick had no doubt whatever that Montoya was not bluffing. Apparently Guevara was convinced, too. But he tried once more. "How do you expect to get us out of here?"

"Simplicity itself. You will walk to my truck, arm in arm with Señor Connel. That is all. Of course if you should be so unfortunate as to have a peon lift his rifle, you would never reach the truck alive. But perhaps you are lucky. Shall we try, señor?"

Guevara hesitated, then shrugged. "Very well."

Connel spoke for the first time. He demanded hoarsely, "Are you going to let him get away with this when our men have all the rifles?"

Guevara smiled wryly. "You do not know the Montoyas, Brad. Call his bluff yourself—only not if you wish to live."

The ex-lieutenant governor walked slowly toward the ring of men. After a moment Connel joined him. Montoya stepped behind them as though taking a stroll through the Calor public gardens. The ring opened and let them through. Rick breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't been quite as confident as Ricardo Montoya appeared to be.

Guevara paused. "May I make an announcement?" he asked.

"Certainly, señor."

Guevara called, "*Amigos!*" Montoya translated the Spanish for the boys. "You know what you have been

guarding. Now I must leave. What is left is yours. Work as fast as you can and find many diamonds. May good fortune be yours!"

The ring broke as the peons rushed to grab shovels. Guevara led the way to the truck.

It was all so easy, Rick thought later, if you were an aristocratic Montoya with a code of honor that permitted no yielding, even unto death. No one else he had ever met could have carried it off quite so superbly.

So fast had the Seabees swung into operation that work on the big hole already was in progress when Montoya dropped the boys off. Pneumatic drills hammered into the congealed lava, cutting holes in which charges would be placed. As the boys watched, explosive was thrust into the holes, a warning was yelled through a portable loud-speaker, and the charge fired. Tons of rock were loosened.

Even before the dust had begun to settle, huge machines were lifting the rock out, or dragging big chunks, and dumping them down the mountainside. Bulldozers kept the rock moving, keeping the entrance clear. Within minutes the hole was empty of rock and the pneumatic drills were hammering again. The cycle was repeated.

The Seabees joked as they worked, and warned each other against shoving a hole right through into hot lava, but the pace never slowed for an instant.

Hour after hour the big hole deepened until the Seabees ran into noxious gases. Then they donned gas masks and continued. Deeper and deeper the

hole was driven, until the temperature at the hole's end was over a hundred degrees. The Seabees merely shortened working time and operated in relays so efficiently that no time was lost.

Rick and Scotty got back to the hole as often as they could, but there was much doing elsewhere. The Hot Springs Hotel swarmed with scientists and observers, and there were heated conferences and late evaluation sessions. The Spindrift scientists were always in demand, and their faces grew gaunt as the days passed.

The hole gave its own location because of the shock waves it sent through the earth to the recorders, and even Rick's untrained eye could see the traces slowly closing with the magma front.

Earthquakes increased in frequency until Rick and Scotty felt as though the ground never ceased shuddering.

The air became noisy with planes as the Military Air Transport Command began ferrying in troops. Flight after flight of huge transports roared in for a landing at the Calor airport, discharged the soldiers, and took off again at once.

And still the diamond hunt continued.

Then, at one o'clock in the afternoon, Hartson Brant called a halt.

"The magma's moving up through the dike," he reported. "It's now or never. Captain Montoya, we will ask the troops to clear the area. Commander Jameson, withdraw all men and equipment except those necessary for the final packing. Dr. Cantrell,

please be ready to place the charge at dawn tomorrow."

The final phase of the operation swung into action. The troops gathered at Redondo and marched shoulder to shoulder southward along the mountain slopes. They herded the diamond seekers before them, sometimes with enough roughness to overcome protests, but mostly with little difficulty. They herded the population entirely around El Viejo, and established a perimeter from Calor northward, with the population confined to a narrow segment of the island along the seaward side.

Loud-speaker trucks roamed along the perimeter, reassuring the people. Military disaster units cooked huge quantities of food and prepared thousands of gallons of coffee and reconstituted milk. American soldiers played with cute little San Luzian kids and —after the diamond seekers became convinced they had never had a chance to find diamonds—the whole affair became one big picnic.

But it was a picnic with overtones of fear.

Rick and Scotty watched the placement of the nuclear explosive—a simple steel can, from the outside —in the big hole. They watched the remaining handful of Seabees load tons of rock in after it. Only the wires connecting the device to a radio firing unit on the beach gave evidence that an explosion equal to ten thousand tons of TNT was about to take place.

Rick asked, "Won't all those rocks keep the volcano from erupting?"

Hartson Brant smiled. "Rick, compared with the

force of the volcano, that atomic device is like a firecracker compared with a hurricane. But even to the nuclear explosion those rocks won't mean much. They're just to confine it a little."

The night passed. San Souci was empty of people. The Seabees were back aboard ship. The scientific instruments were in place. Only a small group of scientists remained, their helicopter standing by. They checked out the radio firing unit, threw switches according to their check list, then announced:

"We're ready!"

CHAPTER XIX

The Old One Yields

Rick banked the Sky Wagon over the fleet. Scotty, in the front passenger seat, had the camera ready. Hartson Brant, in the rear seat, had a motion-picture camera poised. Governor Montoya, the fourth in the party, even had his personal camera along.

Their cameras were not the only ones. Nearly every ship had its official photographers, and there were photography planes in the air.

Directly under the Sky Wagon now was a U. S. destroyer. Aboard her was the nuclear firing party from Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, and the UN Observer Group. On other ships of the fleet were the representatives of the interested nations and the Seabees.

Rick turned up the volume of his plane radio. By agreement, the count-down was to be broadcast to all aircraft over one of the airport frequencies.

"Thirty seconds!" the voice said.

"Won't we need dark glasses?" Scotty asked.

"No," Hartson Brant replied. "The nuclear fireball won't emerge. If it gets a little too bright, squint and turn your head."

"How long after the nuclear shot will the volcano go?" Rick asked.

"We don't know. Anywhere from seconds to hours. It depends on how much of a path the nuclear shot cracks."

"Ten seconds!"

Rick made sure they had a good view of El Viejo's western slope, and held the plane on course.

"Five, four, three, two, one . . .

"Zero!"

There was an instant of quiet, then dust spurted from the deep hole, followed by billowing clouds of pulverized rock. Down below, the earth heaved as though from another earthquake, and a line of waves appeared, running from shore outward!

The dust settled slowly, hanging in the air like a great gray ball.

The nuclear explosion, deep underground, had gone off.

"Now what?" Rick wondered.

Hartson Brant said quietly, "We may have to wait a while."

"That explosion sure didn't look like the pictures I've seen of shots in Nevada," Rick told him.

"No, Rick. This was too far underground. They've had those in Nevada, too, but the pictures don't get much publicity because they're not spectacular."

Far below, where the end of the big hole had been,

the huge chamber blown by the atomic explosion was white-hot with trapped heat and radioactivity. Below the chamber the earth was shattered, with myriad tiny cracks reaching far down.

Some cracks reached the white-hot magma. Instantly the magma exploited the new weakness, pressure was released until . . .

"Look!" Even in the plane Scotty's yell was loud.

Rick turned in time to see the side of El Viejo blow off in an explosion that made ten kilotons of fission seem puny indeed. For an instant he saw thousands of tons of white-hot lava rise into the air, then it fell into the sea. Instantly steam clouds blanketed the area, but the steam was mixed with traces of red and gray from the rock carried upward.

A great boulder, weighing many tons, was hurled high in the air to fall into the steam cloud. The great rift in the volcano widened, and the molten lava was visible until steam rose again.

Under the steam cloud was an inferno, but it was only occasionally visible as the wind tore rents in the vapor. The noise must be deafening, Rick knew, but only a low rumble and an occasional hissing could be heard in the plane.

"Well," Hartson Brant said wearily, "it worked."

Governor Luis Montoya spoke gently. "Yes, my friend. It did indeed work. And it has saved our island. I doubt that a single life was lost, thanks to you and your associates."

"We'd better be sure." The scientist smiled. "Rick, suppose you fly us around the island?"

"Yes, sir." Rick instantly swung the Sky Wagon onto a northward course that would take them past the erupting volcano and on to the north. He kept well out to sea, because now and then he could see big rocks flying through the air as the volcano spouted.

Only the immediate area was affected. The new outlet was about a half mile wide, stretching from sea level and possibly below, to about a quarter mile up the slope. Beyond the crater San Luz seemed normal, although Rick knew there were no human beings in the area.

Not until he passed Redondo did signs of life appear, and then the beach became black with people. The wave of humanity extended inward to the slopes of El Viejo and along the beach to Calor. Past Calor, at the airport, troops not needed on the perimeter waited for their planes. Already there were planes landing.

Rick completed the circuit of the island, then on impulse moved past the volcano and took a good look at where the diamond pipe had been. A momentary wind blew the area clear long enough for him to glimpse white-hot lava.

"Well," he remarked, "there go Connel's diamonds. Either buried, or burned."

"Cheer up," Scotty said with a grin. "Maybe El Viejo is making some new ones."

Governor Montoya added the final word. "I hope not. But if so, I can only hope they will not be discovered just before the next eruption!"

CHAPTER XX

A Few Souvenirs

San Luz settled back to normal in an astonishingly short time, a tribute to the calm nerves of the population. Within recorded island history, the discovery of diamonds was the sole event that seemed to have excited most of the islanders.

The troops left on MATS planes. The ships withdrew, except for two oceanographic ships sent hurriedly by Columbia University and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute. Aboard were not only oceanographers, but marine biologists experienced in radiation physics. They would keep track of events in the sea for many months.

The scientific population of the Hot Springs Hotel did not decrease appreciably. The combination of advance warning of eruption, a nuclear explosion, and the eruption itself provided data never before obtainable. The scientists intended to make the most of it.

The courts of San Luz went into operation again.

Guevara was charged with treason, Connel with attempted murder. The boys gave depositions—sworn testimony—to the government attorneys. But Ruiz would be his own best witness. The doctor promised that he would be able to testify by the time the case came to trial.

At a dinner for the Spindrift scientists, the governor presented certificates of appreciation to each one of the party, including the boys. Then he made a short speech.

"I could thank you, but words are inadequate in the face of the deed. An island and its people have been saved. You did this. What more is there that can be said? We will not forget. Already, with the help of my good friend Esteben Balgos, we are planning to erect a permanent volcanic observatory and laboratory in which scientists can work and learn from El Viejo. I do not ask your permission—I merely inform you that it is to be called Spindrift Memorial Laboratory."

The scientists murmured in protest, but the governor held up his hand. "I know you do not approve. I do not ask you to. It is accomplished. Also, we will have a small but imperishable plaque over the door. It will say simply: 'This laboratory is dedicated to the scientists of the Spindrift Scientific Foundation. They saved San Luz.' Your names will be listed."

The governor was adamant. He said with a twinkle that the scientists could make representations through formal diplomatic channels to the governments of Venezuela, Colombia, and Great Britain if they

wished, but so far as he was concerned, the matter was closed.

It was Rick who changed the subject. He reached into his pocket and drew out the handful of diamonds that he had carried there since the day he found out what they were.

"We have to give these back," he said. "I picked them up, but we have no more right to them than Connel or Guevara. It wasn't a legal mining claim, I guess."

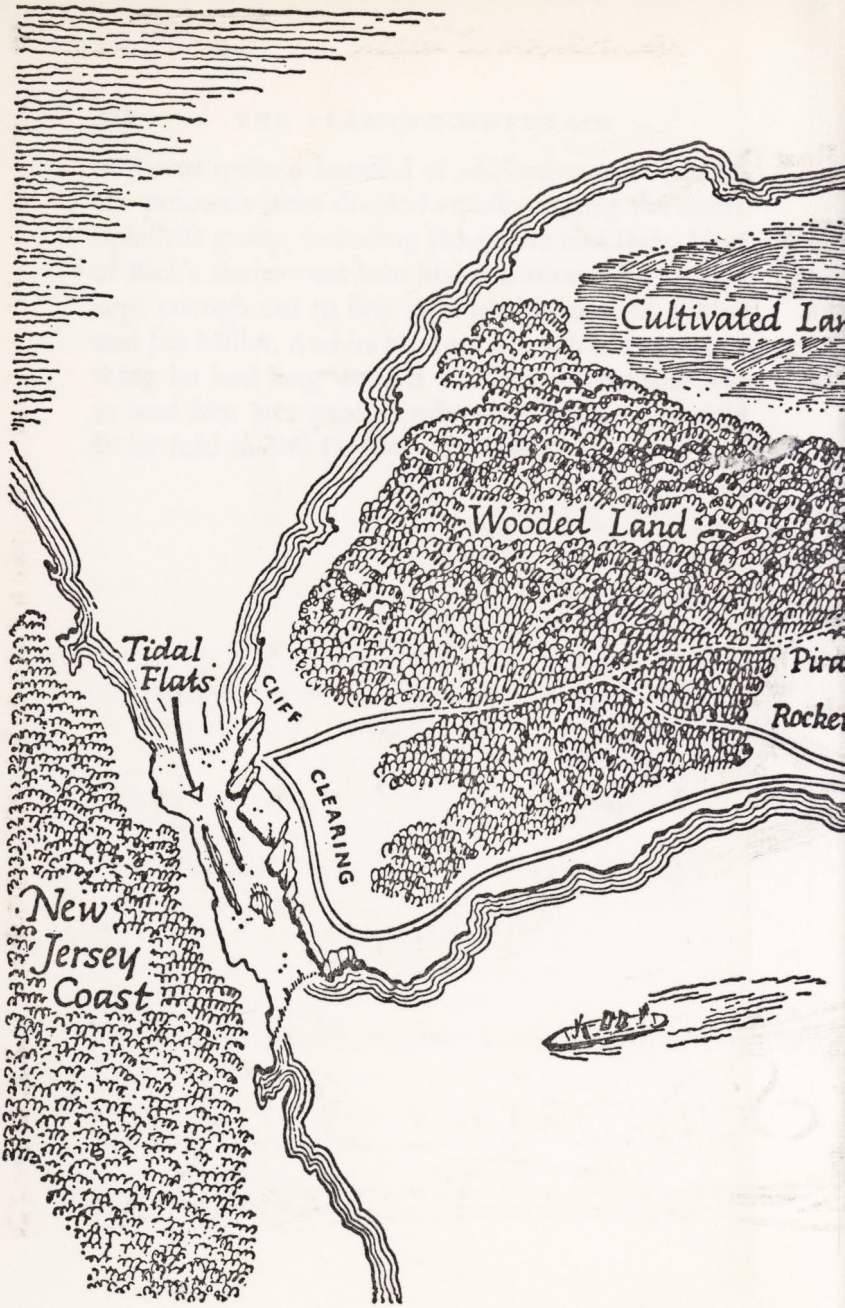
Governor Montoya shook his head. "Rick, who will ever know how many diamonds were found? Already I hear of several huge crystals among the people. We have confiscated several times that amount from Guevara and Connel. Should we penalize you for being honest? I think not. You found them, and in the finding you were instrumental in saving the island. They are yours."

Again the governor was adamant. He simply stated that the matter was settled, and that was that.

"Then they're not mine," Rick said finally. "They belong to all of us, share and share alike. I happened to be the one who picked them up, but we were all involved with El Viejo, so we share equally. Of course we're not sure there's anything to share. These may be only of industrial grade."

As it happened, Rick was wrong. The diamonds were, for the most part, of gem grade. Even after paying import duty, they were bought at a handsome price, uncut, by one of New York's leading diamond importers.

It was quite a handful of souvenirs, even though the proceeds were divided equally among the entire Spindrift group, including Honorario and Ruiz. Most of Rick's share went into his education fund, but he kept enough out to buy gifts for his mother, Barby, and Jan Miller. And he kept out enough to buy something he had long wanted . . . something that was to lead him into another adventure-mystery, a story to be told in **THE FLYING STINGAREE.**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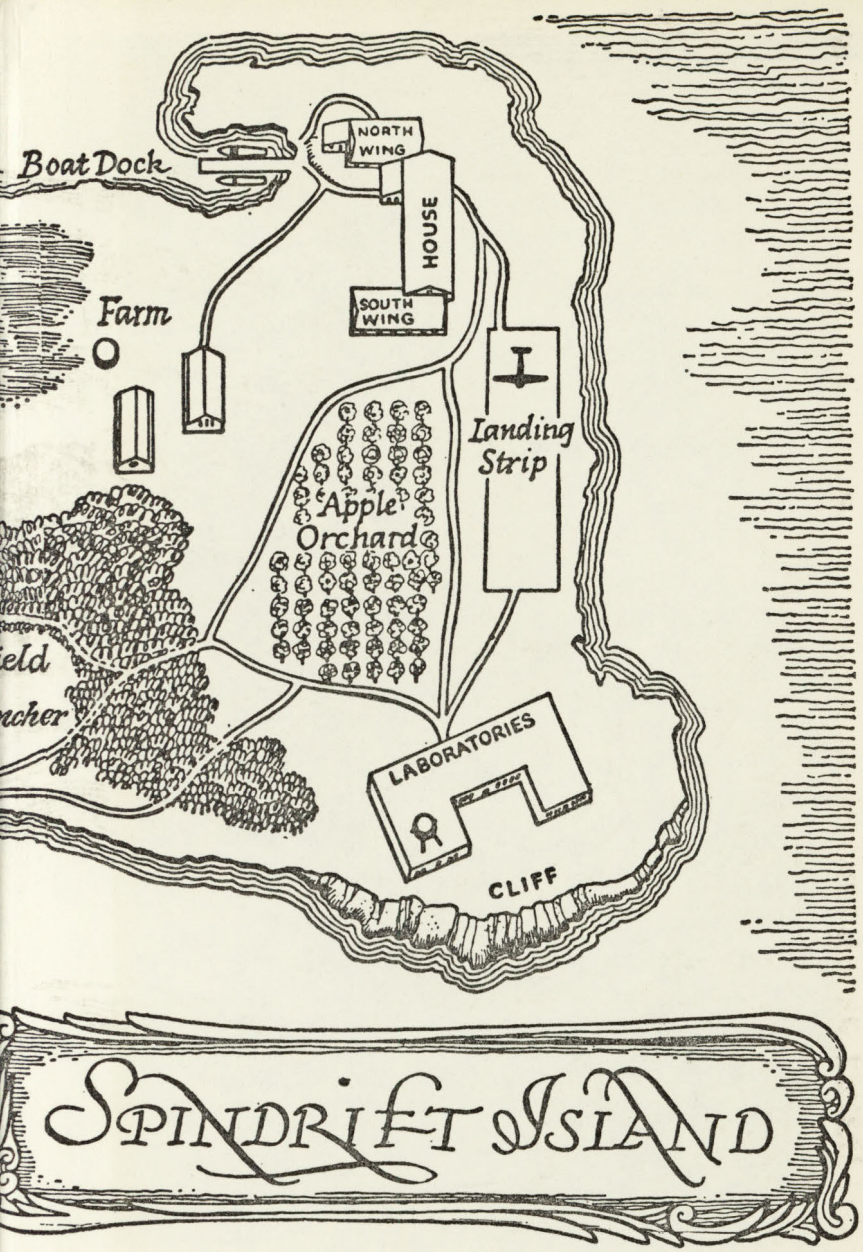

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